

IDIC

**HOME
to
ROOST 3**

**a
Star Trek
fanzine**



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Hello, everyone, welcome to this third and last issue of HOME TO ROOST.

It's shorter than the other two, because we've now run out of stories that we had printed by other editors. Two of these stories - EXPOSURE and TEETH OF THE LYNX - have been reprinted already in this country, the one in an issue of Janet Hunt's CLASSIFIED ASSIGNMENTS and the second in ALNITAH COLLECTED, but to the best of our knowledge both of these zines are now out of print. We can only apologise to anyone buying the zine if in fact they already have both of these stories.

As I write this, I've almost finished typing the second issue of Scotpress's MAKE IT SO, and as soon as that is finished I'll be starting on stories for the first issue of IDIC LOG. Meanwhile, Karen Sparks has volunteered to do some typing for us; she's currently copying a long novel by a new writer, Christopher Ng. We don't have many male writers in fandom, and Christopher is a welcome addition to their ranks.

We're hoping to have at least two new zines out in time for Rec-Con and a further two for Midcon - some of these, Scotpress zines and some of them IDIC ones. If we're lucky it might even be more.

As always, we're looking for submissions for both Scotpress and IDIC zines. For Scotpress, no movie-based stories, no death of main characters (except Yar), no stories set on other ships, no adult themes. For IDIC, no adult themes. All stories should include at least one character who appeared in aired Trek.

Submissions should be sent to either -

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EXPOSURE

by

Sheila Clark

There were many worlds not suitable for colonisation that were nevertheless of considerable interest to scientists. Some were extremely unstable, and were being studied prior to their break-up in so far futile attempts to discover just what were the forces behind such a total disruption of a world; some were not suitable for climatic or atmospheric reasons, and the unfortunate scientists assigned there had to live in environmental units, sometimes for years, while they were completing their investigations.

Thule was one such planet. Currently in the grip of an ice age, one much more severe than Earth had ever suffered, the entire planet was covered by a layer of ice and frozen snow not less than fifty feet deep at the equator - and much thicker elsewhere; yet the scientists had discovered already that the ground underneath was thick with plant and animal remains, the ruins of cities and artifacts constructed by intelligent life. They were still trying to discover the reason for the catastrophe that had overtaken the planet several millennia previously.

The Enterprise had called in on her way to revisit Eminiar, where Ambassador Fox had completed his diplomatic duties, having successfully negotiated a peace treaty between Eminiar and Vendikar, and an agreement between both and the Federation. The ship had to pick up Fox, a duty the crew regarded with mixed feelings. But first they had to drop off several new personnel at the research station on Thule.

Spock beamed down with the scientists; he was curious to see what results the station had achieved in its studies of the errant sun whose variations seemed to have been the reason for the planet's death. An experiment was currently in progress; he was invited to stay, if the ship could stand by for twenty four hours, to see the result of it.

Kirk was mildly amused by the Vulcan's well-concealed eagerness. No-one else would have recognised his attitude, of course; unless, improbably, McCoy did, but Kirk had come to recognise all his friend's reactions well. He sympathised with Spock's desire to see some straightforward results in a straightforward series of stellar radiation tests, and decided that they could, in fact, well spare the time.

He went down himself to see the scientists' leader, to make sure that the results would indeed be ready inside the stated time, and on being assured that they would, he agreed to the delay. In addition, he stayed on the planet, taking advantage of the situation to have a short break himself.

He found the scientists' description of their life there, and their discussion of the various tests they had been running, surprisingly interesting; and found himself, as it got later, unwilling to leave. He eventually decided to stay all night, and in time he and Spock went off to the quarters they had been given; a

double cabin, like all the others on the station.

He was more tired than he had thought, and fell asleep quickly. His last sight before his eyes closed was of Spock, still sitting up, studying a report he had been lent by one of the station personnel.

He woke hours later, and glanced round to see if Spock had ever got to bed. The other bed had been slept in, but there was no sign of the Vulcan. Kirk stretched and got up.

Dr. Waterstone, the senior scientist, glanced up as Kirk walked into the station mess. "'Morning, Captain."

"'Morning. Mr. Spock about?"

Waterstone shook his head. "I haven't seen him. I thought he was still in bed."

"No, he was up before I woke. I suppose he's slipped off to have another look at some of the tests you have set up."

Waterstone grinned. "He's certainly keen, isn't he? What is it like, having an eager beaver like that in your crew?"

Kirk was silent for a moment, wondering how he could ever explain just what it was like... "He's... not always easy to live up to," he said at last, slowly. "But... it's good having someone like him as second in command. Completely reliable... completely trustworthy... and able to turn his hand to anything. I'll miss him when he's promoted... I suppose he will be, eventually," he finished with an inner shudder as he thought of how lonely it would be when - if - that ever happened.

He joined Waterstone as he ate; in time they were joined by several of the other personnel. Waterstone glanced round them all.

"Is Mr. Spock not coming for breakfast?"

There was silence for a moment, then Dr. Carson, who was in charge of the particular experiment that interested Spock, said, "I haven't seen him this morning. I did think it was odd, he was supposed to be coming to check out some figures with me about half an hour ago, but I decided that Captain Kirk must have needed him for something."

Kirk shook his head. "He was away when I got up." He glanced round the group. "Has anyone seen him?"

There was a general headshake, with several voices contributing, "No."

Kirk frowned. "That's strange," he said. He wasn't worried - yet - not quite - but he was uneasy. This was unlike the conscientious Vulcan.

It soon transpired that there was no sign of Spock anywhere on the station.

Kirk called the ship and told Scott to institute a general sensor scan of the surface around the station for Spock; and also

called down a security contingent to help with a ground search, difficult as that would be in this frozen climate. McCoy accompanied the security men, without orders. Kirk couldn't find it in his heart to blame the Doctor, whose anxiety showed clearly on his face, and allowed him to remain. After all, M'Benga was on the Enterprise; he knew all about Vulcans, and could almost be called a better man than McCoy to tend Spock should anything be wrong with him - even though McCoy always dealt with injuries to Spock himself, as he did with injuries to the Captain.

They had to wrap up well for the conditions, which were cold and stormy. Fortunately they didn't need to wear environmental suits, since the air had remained breathable, if cold; but the keen knife-edge of the wind was a killer, and they had to have protection against that. If Spock were out there, he would have no protection against the icy blast. But - if he were... why had he gone?

The search parties spread out, four men to a group. They had orders to report to the ship every half hour; failure to do so would result in an automatic alarm being raised for them as well. Kirk knew that he should wait on the ship for these reports, but he was rapidly passing from worry about Spock to acute anxiety; he couldn't sit still, waiting while others searched. He had to go too, even though it might be futile.

What had happened? Why did Spock leave the base without saying anything to anyone? A glance at McCoy showed that he, too, was rapidly reaching the point of being sick with worry. Spock... Oh, God, Spock. Where are you?

He and McCoy went together, with two guards. They moved in line abreast, watching the ground in front, behind and at the side of them, sinking into the soft powder snow that drifted in great crests across their path, finding a harder patch that supported their weight, then sinking in thigh-deep again. It was exhausting walking, and at heart Kirk knew that this ground search was probably wasted effort; the sensor scan surely had more chance of success, yet... to pick up one Vulcan reading in all this wasteland... He stumbled on grimly, hands and feet numb with cold.

The ground began to rise steeply. They started to make their way up the slope, slipping a little as they went. Part way up, Kirk stopped. "Time to contact the ship," he said. He pulled out his communicator, fumbling a little as his fingers refused to co-operate fully.

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Uhura here."

"All well with my party," he reported. "What about the others?"

"You're the last to check in, Captain," she replied. "No-one has anything to report."

"Keep monitoring. Kirk out."

He put his communicator back in his belt, and turned his attention back to the steep slope they had to negotiate. *It's as well there's so much powder snow*, he mused. It gave them something to sink their feet in. Without it, they would be slipping all over the place, unable to make much progress...

But Spock couldn't have come this way, a tiny logical corner of his mind kept saying. There aren't any footprints... We should have looked out for footprints.

He began to reach for his communicator again when there was a soft rumbling above them. He looked up. The snow was beginning to slide... They were right in the path of an avalanche.

There was nothing they could do to avoid it. The powder snow in which they were standing was too soft and deep to allow them to run to either side out of the path of the descending torrent of snow; and, powder though it was, Kirk knew enough about avalanches to know that its weight would be deadly. He made one last attempt to reach his communicator in order to give the ship their position, at least, but in vain. The communicator was knocked out of his hand by the force of the snow, and they were whirled away from the slope they had ascended so laboriously in a confused tangle of arms and legs, somersaulting and rolling as they went...

The rumbling of the avalanche died into silence. The powder spray drifted down again. Stillness and silence returned to the winter-clad land. No trace of colour broke the whiteness of the snow...

McCoy woke from a cold dream of being trapped in a refrigerator to discover that it was no dream. A freezing weight pressed on his arms and back; his cheek was cold where it was pressed against the snow; one arm was outstretched, held immovably by the weight of snow. The other was bent up beside his face; it was solely due to the bent arm that there was a small pocket of air beside his nose.

He tried to push himself upwards. At first he thought that he was immovably buried, but then he felt the snow above him shift a little. He braced himself, pressing upwards as hard as he could; and the snow gave.

He found himself on the surface of a churned-up heap of snow, aware of a paradoxical feeling of relief that he was safe and fear for Kirk, coupled with the worry about Spock that already existed.

He stared round, searching desperately for some indication of where his Captain and friend might be; and, incidentally, where the two guards were. He could see nothing; no mark in the snow except the piled-up unevenness where the avalanche had come to rest.

"Jim!" he shouted, knowing that it was probably futile. If Kirk were buried deep, he would be able neither to hear nor to reply; he might even now be suffocating only a few feet away, and die within reach of help because McCoy had no way of knowing where that help was needed.

As he had expected, there was no answer. He felt automatically for his communicator, and found nothing. The force of the avalanche had torn away both his communicator and his medical pouch. He had no way of calling for help; or of giving it, should he find one of the buried men. "Jim!" he called again, hopelessly.

From somewhere near came a muffled shout. "Bones!"

He took a deep, relieved breath. At least Jim was alive; it was simply a question of finding where he was buried and trying to

dig him out. "Keep talking, Jim," he called. "I'll try to find you."

He followed the voice and when at last he thought he had traced it he began digging in the snow with his bare hands; his gloves were somewhere deep under the surface with his communicator and medikit. The first thing he realised was that he had hurt his left arm; something he had been unaware of until he started using it. He gritted his teeth and dug on; Jim's safety, his very life perhaps, depended on the speed with which he could dig him out.

Kirk wasn't far down, however. He also had trapped a tiny pocket of air in a fold of his arm, but he was held absolutely immovably by the snow. McCoy found his legs first, but once he had reached his friend and knew he was no longer digging in the dark, he speeded up, ignoring the pain that shot through his arm.

Once uncovered, Kirk looked up at him, relief in his eyes. "Thanks, Bones." He sat up and grimaced as the movement hurt his back. "The guards?"

McCoy shook his head. "Buried too. They haven't called; unless they happened to have been near the surface, I don't think there's much chance for them."

"Are you hurt?"

McCoy shrugged. "My left arm - I think it's a strain or a pulled muscle, caused by the way our bodies were twisted by the avalanche. And you, Jim? Where are you hurt?"

Kirk looked at him, then decided he couldn't hide it. "My back's sore. Like you, I think I probably twisted it." He tried to stand, and gasped involuntarily as the movement sent waves of pain through his back; McCoy moved instantly to support him.

"Lie down again, Jim. I want a look."

Kirk obeyed. He controlled his reaction this time, however; he was prepared for it. McCoy felt over his back carefully. "I think you're right, Jim. It's just a twist, but a bad one. I'd prescribe several days in bed, on boards, if we were back on the ship; but since we're here, you'll just have to manage somehow until we get back to the station - "

"What about Spock?"

McCoy looked at him. "What about Spock?"

"We came out here to look for him."

"Jim, I want to find Spock as much as you do. But my first responsibility is to you. I must get you back to the ship. You're hurt. You're not fit to go wandering about looking for Spock. Once you're there, I'll come back down and go on looking for Spock. I promise."

Kirk shook his head. "I must go on, find Spock... "

"Jim, you're just being obstinate. You must go back to the ship. That's a medical order."

Kirk sighed, accepting the necessity. There was, after all, no

guarantee that they were anywhere near Spock - if, indeed, he was out here. They began to make their awkward way back, McCoy helping Kirk. Once they had moved off the course of the avalanche, Kirk stopped. He looked back. "My men... "

"If they were still alive, they would have either managed to get themselves to the surface or called out by now," McCoy said gently. "I imagine they both died without regaining consciousness."

Kirk nodded sadly. They went on, Kirk clumsy as he tried to walk without moving the maltreated muscles of his back, McCoy trying to help him but becoming more and more aware of the pain in his left arm. He was beginning to suspect that - although in his desperation he had managed to use it - one of the bones in his forearm might be broken.

It was difficult to move in the deep powder snow. They waded through it, thigh deep, both beginning to feel the cold increasingly acutely. McCoy began worrying about frostbite. His hands were frozen, his feet so numb that he couldn't feel the ground under them. He suspected that Kirk was in the same state, even though he was going on uncomplainingly.

Then they came across a track where someone had gone through the snow before them, moving away from the station at an angle to their own trail. Kirk stopped.

Both men looked at the track, then at each other.

"Spock?" Kirk asked.

"It... it could be," McCoy replied, almost reluctantly. He wanted to find Spock; but he was also desperate to get Kirk back to the ship. And he knew that if Kirk did seriously think that this track was Spock's, he would not rest until he found him. McCoy looked at Kirk again, recognising the expression on his friend's face. And, at heart, he wanted the same thing.

They turned onto the already trampled track and began to follow it. The steadier going let Kirk move more quickly without straining his back; but he was still very conscious of the pain from it.

The track took them towards an ice-covered cliff - where the hillside they had been climbing steepened even more. And there, lying in a tiny cave formed by the bulge of ice clinging to the rock wall, was the recumbent body of the Vulcan.

Both men ran to him. Kirk gasped again as the sudden movement twisted his back. McCoy reached for Spock's wrist, then changed his mind and went for the neck pulse. Kirk watched him anxiously.

"Is he... ?"

"He's alive, but he's in a bad way. He's cold - very, very cold. It would be serious enough in either of us, but in a Vulcan, with a normal temperature so much higher than ours... He's suffering from hypothermia, Jim. We have to warm him."

Kirk looked at him. "We could try to carry him back to the station - " he began.

"If we were both fit, I'd say yes. But we're not. We can't even begin to carry him. We have to stay here with him, and warm

him."

"How?" Kirk asked desperately.

"With our bodies. Lie down beside him."

Kirk obeyed. He put his arms round Spock, holding him close, as McCoy lay down on the other side, pressing his body close to the Vulcan.

Their backs got colder and colder; their hands and feet were so numb that McCoy worried about it. What damage was being done to their toes in particular that would remain undetected until they got back to the Enterprise... if indeed they ever did? He had never been quite sure if the stories of frostbitten men taking their socks off and pulling their toes off at the same time was fact or exaggeration. He was beginning to think that they would die here... but at least their bodies would be found together.

After a long time, Kirk said, "It's time that someone was coming to look for us."

"Yes," McCoy replied.

Kirk abruptly made up his mind. "Stay here with Spock, Bones. I'm going for help."

"Jim!" McCoy protested.

"We won't survive here much longer, will we?" McCoy reluctantly shook his head. "And you can still keep Spock reasonably warm?"

"Yes," McCoy said, still reluctantly.

"Then the only sensible thing is for me to go for help."

"Wait a minute. You can't go. Your back - "

"Bones, you can't leave Spock. You know that. I wouldn't begin to know what to do for him if you left and he got worse. It's my back that's sore - there's nothing wrong with my legs."

McCoy gave in. "Be careful."

Kirk nodded. "I will. It's your lives I'm gambling for."

He got up, struggling to control his face. His back was agonisingly sore, and he was certain that the cold was numbing it slightly. He was very stiff.

One thing - there was a well-marked track back to the station. He should be able to follow it with a minimum of trouble.

Pain shot through his back. He found it easier to move with his body twisted slightly forward, and wondered if he had done it any permanent damage. This wasn't the first time he had hurt his back. Nor the second, either, he reflected. If he kept on injuring it, might he one day find himself crippled? He resolutely put the thought out of his mind.

Would he never reach the station?

He stumbled on. He was beginning to get very sleepy. It would be so pleasant to lie down and stop forcing himself to move; pleasant to lie unmoving so that his back no longer needed to hurt him... He tripped and fell.

It was nice lying still... He felt strangely warm... His eyes drooped shut...

Spock! McCoy!

He jerked his head up, forcing his eyes to open. He looked at the snow on which he was lying. Snow. Cold.

Cold. It was the killer. He forced himself to his feet again.

He stumbled forward. His body seemed to be one great ache now, but in a way he was grateful for it, for it helped him to fight sleep. Then, ahead of him, he saw the research station.

It looked miles away.

He had to reach it. Spock... McCoy... their lives depended on it. He had to reach it... had to... had to... reach...

He became aware of warmth and comfort; faint voices sounded in a muffled distance. There was a familiarity about the voices...

He opened his eyes; blinked in the sudden light.

"Jim!"

He blinked again. McCoy, one arm in a sling, was standing beside him. "Bones... what about Spock?" His voice sharpened in some alarm.

"I'm here, Jim."

He turned his head. Spock lay in the next bed, looking most unwilling to be there. "They found you," he said contentedly.

McCoy nodded. "Apparently you staggered into the station three-quarters asleep. You managed to tell them where to find us, then collapsed. We weren't too bad; Spock was warming up nicely although he still hadn't come round when they got to us, and we were beamed straight on board. We... we managed to get the bodies of the two men who died," he added. "They were both killed instantly. Meanwhile, Scotty has us on course for Eminiar. We'll be a little late getting there; Ambassador Fox will just have to wait."

Kirk nodded. Then he turned to Spock. "What I don't understand is what happened to you."

For a moment, the Vulcan appeared to be thinking. "I was wakened... it seemed, by a noise. I looked outside, and thought I saw... something... moving away. I decided to follow; all reports indicate that there is no native life surviving on Thule, although one set of experimental results shows anomalous readings, as if in fact there are life forms here. I could make nothing out clearly, however, merely movement... and that only out of the corner of my eye. As the moon set, I lost sight of... whatever it was - and then found that it was too dark to retrace my steps with any certainty.

I sat down to await daylight... The cold must have affected my judgement more than I thought possible, and I fell asleep.

"I reported... what I thought I saw... to the scientists on Thule before we left; what they do about it is up to them."

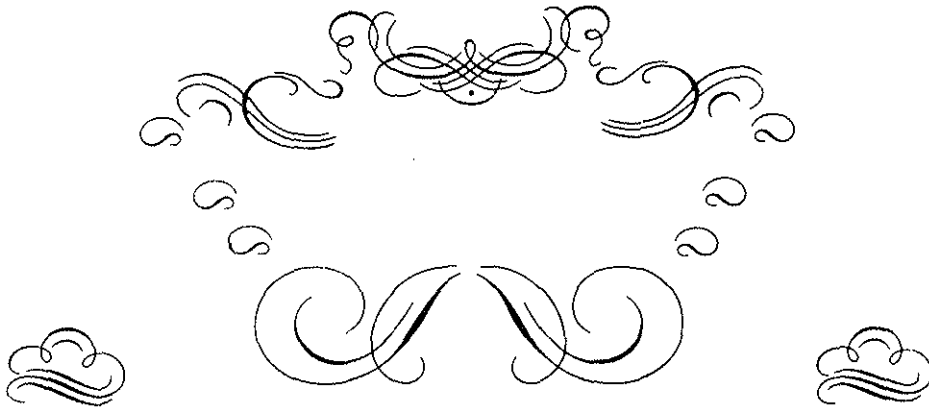
"I see," Kirk said. "You know, Spock, that scientific curiosity of yours is going to be the death of you one of these days." He tried to sit up and winced.

"Lie still, Jim," McCoy said, just too late to stop him making the attempt. "You wrenched your back badly; it'll take a few days to heal. You can play chess with Spock provided he makes all the moves while you stay flat on your back - he'll be here for a day or two as well."

"What about yourself, Doctor?" Spock inquired.

"Me, Spock? Well, think about it. You and Jim will be getting out in a day or two - but I live here!"

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CURE

by

Sheila Clark

Even at a distance of thirty astronomical units, an unheard-of distance from its primary for a planet to be habitable, the temperature of Gamma Geminorum was high - fully equivalent to a tropical noon on Earth. The brilliant white sun, so distant that it was little more than a dot in the sky, gave out a fantastic heat. The inner six planets were infernos - even with full protection it was impossible to land on them. The seventh was slightly better, though full protection was needed; the eighth was livable. The ninth was still exploitable without protection. After that, the remaining ten planets got progressively colder, and from the outer three the sun was indistinguishable from the stars.

The Enterprise was on a series of standard visits to recent colonies when it called there. Kirk and Spock beamed down with McCoy to pay the leader of the colony a casual visit while McCoy performed routine medical tests.

When they materialised, the first thing they noticed was the dry, shrivelled look of the plants around them.

"Strange," Spock commented. "Early reports on the planet indicated plentiful rainfall and lush vegetation."

"There haven't been any reports from the colony of unusual weather conditions," Kirk said.

"It's serious if the crop does fail," McCoy worried. "One of the native plants, gaminal, has widespread medical value - as useful as penicillin was in the early days of its discovery. If the gaminal crop fails, there'll be a shortage of the drug - not this year, but next, and that could have serious repercussions."

Kirk said slowly, "I wonder why Mason hasn't reported this?"

One answer for the crop failure came quickly.

The planet had a fairly intelligent humanoid population. Getting a treaty had proved to be fairly difficult; the native language was a very limited one and there was some uncertainty as to whether the natives had actually understood what was meant by a treaty. They had worked for the colonists for some time, then -

"One day they just upped and left," Mason said. "About three years ago. There had been something of an argument - as far as they could argue; we'd been uprooting great masses of a very common weed to make planting space, the natives objected - or so it seemed, but we're not sure why. Their language is limited to four or five hundred words, mostly nouns and verbs - no direct negatives or affirmatives... "

"That hardly seems sufficient for the everyday use of any but

the most primitive of cultures," Spock commented.

"They do have a very wide range of colloquial expressions," Mason admitted. "Unfortunately they don't have the vocabulary to explain what these mean - and you have to grow up with a language to grasp colloquialisms fully, unless you're a fantastic linguist - which none of us are. Half of what the natives ever said, indeed more than half, we understood the words but not the meaning. After all, think of the literal meaning of a phrase like 'hit the sack'."

"A religious reason, perhaps?" Kirk suggested, recalling the subject under discussion.

"They have no religious beliefs that we ever saw." Mason swiped at a large black and yellow insect that buzzed round his head, and flattened it. "Watch you're not bitten by one of these. The bite is poisonous. Yet when we killed them, the natives objected - we think."

"Perhaps the natives are opposed to bloodshed?" Spock offered.

Mason shook his head, accepting the word 'bloodshed' in this context without demur. "They eat meat." He flicked the dead insect away. "Mark you, the neowasp's bite doesn't seem to bother them. Only the colonists die."

"That can happen," McCoy said. "I've found that either we're immune to alien bugs, or we're very susceptible, and you can never be sure which it'll be until you're exposed."

Mason nodded. "Fortunately, the things have a very short life. They bother us for about a fortnight, then there aren't any more for a year. But we do lose two or three colonists a year from their bites."

"Is there no cure at all?" McCoy asked.

"None - and very little time to experiment with cures. The victim is usually dead within a couple of hours. Next time, we try something else. So far, nothing has worked."

"I'll see what I can find out," McCoy offered.

"We'd be grateful," Mason admitted. "You're the first Starfleet doctor we've had here at neowasp time. You could easily find out something our medical staff has missed."

McCoy picked up the dead insect, glanced at Kirk for permission, and left, flicking open his communicator as he went.

Mason went on. "Since the natives left, the plantations have slowly stopped flourishing, in spite of all we can do... although I'll swear we tend the gaminal plants better than the natives ever did. We could never get them to see the importance of weeding, for example, or get them to understand that caterpillars were undesirable. We lost up to a quarter of the yield each year to caterpillars - big yellow-striped ones - very similar in colour to the neowasp. We think it may have been the larva, though we never did find any eggs. Certainly the insect is much scarcer now that we've been spraying the plants to kill off the caterpillars. Granted, the larvae ate a lot of the weed too, but we can uproot that - weedkiller doesn't work on the commonest weed - the stuff we call blackweed."

Spock said slowly, "Some plants are of value because they replace elements such as nitrogen that other plants remove from the soil. Is it possible that this blackweed is one such - and the gaminal plants are failing because they are exhausting the resources of the soil in which they are planted?"

"We did think of that, Mr. Spock," Mason replied. "We made tests. They all proved negative. There was only one trace element present in fractionally greater quantities in a blackweed patch than in the gaminal fields - so fractionally that its presence was negligible, and we couldn't even identify it."

"If you couldn't identify it, is there any possibility that it is some element native to this planet?" Spock asked. "Something not found elsewhere?"

"The trace was so small that it was impossible to say whether it was something purely native or not," Mason replied.

"Do you mind if I perform my own tests?" Spock asked.

"I'd be glad if you did," Mason replied. "As with the Doctor, you could easily find something we've missed. Our personnel is non-specialised, and as such we don't have the expertise of Starship personnel."

Kirk watched as Spock also left, then asked, "Where have the natives gone?"

"We're not sure. There was a settlement of them five or six miles west of here; it looks as if it's still lived in - we occasionally send hunters out that way - but since this blew up, they haven't seen anyone there."

"As if they're avoiding you because you've offended them?"

"Well... yes. Though why they should be offended - " Mason broke off with a shrug. "It's the language difficulty, Captain. If we did offend them, we couldn't understand them if they tried to tell us why. There was nothing we did that we hadn't been doing for years."

Spock's report on his soil samples was almost a carbon copy of Mason's. The traces were too minute to be identifiable, even although they were detectable. "I think it's a native substance," Spock finished, "but I can't be certain."

McCoy's report on the insect was hardly better.

"The damage is caused by an anti-coagulant in the saliva, similar to that of biting species from a number of planets including Earth," he said. "But I can't, from studying the saliva, begin to guess why it causes such an adverse reaction in Humans. I'd need blood samples from someone who's been bitten, and from the natives as well since they're not affected. Mr. Mason - has no-one ever survived its bite?"

"No. Oh, there are fewer deaths now than there were a year or two ago, but then there are fewer of the insects."

"And you're quite certain the natives aren't affected?"

"As far as we can tell they're not."

"Then this could simply be a case of an extreme susceptibility to an alien substance."

"You said the saliva is similar to that of any biting insect," Kirk challenged.

"Yes, it's similar. But its not identical. Even among Earth species, some cause a greater allergic reaction than others, and some people are more susceptible than others."

Not unexpectedly, Kirk decided that his best plan was to try to contact the natives. He set off with Spock and McCoy for the nearby settlement.

As they got further from the colony, the plants began to look healthier, and the birds, sparse near the colonists' village, began to make a more frequent appearance. Spock stopped to watch one. It hopped along a branch; its beak jabbed and it raised its head, a squirming black and yellow caterpillar in its beak. He speeded up to rejoin the others, who had not stopped.

"Captain," he said. "Mr. Mason neglected to tell us that birds eat those caterpillars he mentioned. They could be a fairly important element in the food chain."

"Would a race as primitive as this appears to be know anything about conservation?" Kirk asked, "Or about the balance of nature?"

"If they live close to nature, Captain, it is not impossible," Spock said slowly. Before he could elaborate, however, McCoy let out a yelp. He slapped at his arm.

A large black and yellow insect hung from his arm by its proboscis.

"Bones!"

McCoy looked at them, pain already in his eyes, then his legs gave way. Spock was just in time to catch him as he fell.

Kirk pulled the insect free and was about to throw it away when Spock stopped him. "Wait, Captain. Bring it. Perhaps the natives have a cure for the bite. If their vocabulary is small, showing them the creature might hasten our explanation."

"Or they might get angry because we had killed one."

"A chance we must take. We must make haste, Jim. Mason said death came in a matter of two hours. It's McCoy's only chance." He swung the doctor into his arms and set off, almost running, along the track, Kirk close at his heels.

The native village was deserted.

Kirk looked round, then glanced helplessly at the Vulcan.

"I suspect that we are being watched," Spock said quietly from

where he knelt beside McCoy.

Kirk shrugged. He looked round again, and said loudly, "Our friend will die unless you help us."

Silence.

"Please help us."

Nothing happened for what seemed like a very long time, although Spock later told Kirk that it was only a few seconds. Then two natives appeared from the undergrowth and walked into the village. They stopped a few yards from Kirk, looking at the unconscious man who lay there, Spock still kneeling at his side.

"You skymen?" The tone made it a question. Kirk nodded. "Skyman die?"

"This bit him." Kirk held out the dead insect. "Its bite kills us."

The natives conferred for a moment. The words the spokey made sense, but the meaning was obscure; Kirk couldn't understand any of the conversation and began to realise exactly what Mason had meant when he spoke of the colloquial nature of the natives' conversation.

Then - "Skymen want cure?"

Kirk nodded. "Skymen have no cure. Skymen want cure," he said.

"Skymen kill cure," the native said.

"Please!" Kirk said desperately. "Help us!"

The natives looked at each other. Then the second one, who had not yet spoken directly to them, walked away to one of the huts. He came back with an earthenware jug and two bowls. He tipped some dark blue liquid into each of the bowls, and gave one to Kirk.

"Drink," he said, and turned to McCoy. Carefully, he began to tip the liquid into McCoy's mouth.

Kirk hesitated, looking at the first man. "Cure," the native said. "Drink."

Kirk tossed it down. It tasted of fruit, with bitter overtones. The first native took the bowl back from him, refilled it and gave it to Spock, who also drank.

"Safe," the native told them. He indicated McCoy. "Cured. Come."

The second native remained crouching by the still unconscious McCoy as the other two followed the first one. He led them to a patch of plants they recognised as the weed the colonists called blackweed.

"Cure," he said. He picked three berries and a leaf. "Boil, crush. Cure."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other. No wonder the natives objected to uprooting the blackweed!

"At a guess, Mason never asked them why the neowasp's bite didn't affect them," Kirk said drily, "and the natives assumed that the colonists had their own cure."

"Come," the native said again.

He led them to a nearby stream, hardly large enough to call a river. He plunged his hand into the soft mud at the edge. The mud underwater looked much greyer than that above the surface. He gestured that they should look close.

"Tiny white specks, Captain," Spock said. "Eggs, perhaps?"

"I'll take your word for it, Spock; the specks are too small for my eyes to see."

"Insect," the native said. He dropped the mud back into the water and washed his hands clean. Then he moved a few yards to where the water ran shallowly over stones. Small nymphs lay on the stones, occasionally rising to the surface.

"Insect," the native said again. "Fish eat."

"I understand," Kirk said.

"Come."

He led them back to the patch of blackweed and turned over several of the leaves, revealing a number of the black and yellow caterpillars.

The native indicated them. "Insect," he said. "Birds eat."

"Definitely a staple in the food chain," Spock commented. "First an aquatic cycle, then a land one. Unusual. Have they a two-year larval cycle, I wonder?"

The native bent and picked up something. He held out on his hand some small, dark-coloured spheres. "Insect drop," he said, "plant eat."

Kirk frowned, puzzled.

"The larval droppings," Spock said. "A fertiliser."

"The trace element?" Kirk said. "And without it the plants are dying."

"Undoubtedly."

"You were right, Spock. These people do have a good grasp of ecology," Kirk mused.

"Mr. Mason will have to accept the depredations of the caterpillars to gain a crop," Spock commented.

"And he'll have to stop weeding," Kirk added. He looked at the native. "We will tell skymen," he said. "We will tell them insect good, plant good. You will go back then, and help them?"

"Insect live, plant live, we go back."

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When they got back to the native settlement, they found McCoy conscious, gingerly flexing his bitten arm.

"I doubt Mason ever bothered to try understanding what the natives were trying to say," Kirk told him. "They had a cure for the bite. Now all we have to do is persuade the colonists to stop weeding and killing caterpillars. They have a choice of losing quarter of the yield or - in a year or two - not getting a crop at all. I don't think it'll be a hard decision."

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WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?

by

Valerie Piacentini

I am facing the Captain of the Enterprise, and I cannot meet his eyes. He has questions for me, and will not relent until I answer. I cannot lie, not to this man: there is no other way out, other than the complete truth.

Our meeting was pure chance. I was returning to Starbase from Earth leave by passenger liner, intending to make the most of my last few days before rejoining the Enterprise. At first, though, it seemed as if I had made a mistake; the ship was as luxurious as I expected, but I quickly found I had little in common with my fellow passengers. They were mainly wealthy tourists on a Grand Tour of the galaxy, with a sprinkling of preoccupied business men and a couple of politicians.

I was just resigning myself to spending most of the trip catching up on some reading when I saw him entering the dining room. In any company he would have been outstanding, but among these bored, busy or jaded people his calm serenity reached out to me.

He saw me across the room, and moved to join me. As he passed I could see the turning heads, hear the whispered comments. Very few people outside Starfleet have ever seen a Vulcan in the flesh, so I was not in the least surprised by the attention he attracted. His face, as usual, was totally impassive, but as he sat down the familiar raised eyebrow told me he was aware of the stir he caused.

He too had spent his leave on Earth; his mother was visiting her family, and he had spent some time with her. It could not have been an unmixed pleasure for Spock; Amanda's family had never quite accepted her marriage to Sarek, and I could well understand that they regarded her strange, half-breed son with a mixture of bewilderment and suspicion.

I think (though he would never have admitted it) that Spock was pleased to see me. On the Enterprise we were so used to him that his non-Human attitudes were accepted as a matter of course; I believe the familiar topics of conversation came as a relief to him. For my part, I was interested to encounter our enigmatic First Officer away from the ship.

It has been said that Vulcans are not very entertaining companions for Humans. I have never found it so with Spock. The range of his interests is so wide, and his knowledge so deep, that any conversation with him can only be a stimulating challenge; and his open curiosity about any new experience made me see my fellow passengers in a new light - almost as though I looked at them through Vulcan, rather than Human, eyes. I found his companionship under these circumstances unexpectedly interesting, although of course our conversation never touched the personal; I knew already that such topics would only drive him at once into his shell.

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So the voyage passed more pleasantly than I had expected, until we were two days out from Starbase. For the first time he did not join me for dinner, and I remembered that he had seemed unusually abstracted when I had seen him earlier in the day. As I lingered over my solitary meal I debated with myself how to pass the evening. The idea of joining any of the other passengers did not appeal to me, and after the stimulation of Spock's company the prospect of an evening alone seemed rather flat.

By the time I had finished my coffee I had decided to return to my cabin; first, though, I would pay a call on Spock. I was not consciously worried about him, but it seemed only courteous to see how he was.

There was no reply to my tentative knock at his door, and a louder summons still brought no response. Perhaps he was ill? Hesitantly I tried the door, and it opened at my touch.

He was lying in a chair, eyes closed, and at first I thought he was asleep. Then I saw the tension in his knuckles as he gripped the arms of the chair, and heard his harsh, laboured breathing. Quickly I crossed to his side. Now I became aware of the parched dryness of his lips, and the sleek dark hair was ruffled, damp with perspiration. Memory came to me then of how once before I had seen him in such a state, and I knew only one thing could account for it - the terrifying pon farr.

My first instinct was to summon help, but there was none to be had. Dr. McCoy, who understood the horrifying implications, was light years away on the Enterprise. Even if the doctor on this ship was familiar with the condition, I could not humiliate Spock by calling him in. It had been bad enough for the proud, reserved Vulcan when his closest friends had learned the secret; to reveal it to a complete stranger would alienate him for ever. Yet I must do something, for without help there could be only one end. On the Enterprise were men whose skill could aid him, women who for love of him would give him the release he so desperately needed. To those men, and to those women, I must account if I failed to help him.

Suddenly he seemed to become aware of my presence, for his eyes opened and he made a conscious effort to appear relaxed. My concern for him must have been plain, for he said,

"Do not be afraid - it is not as you think. It is not the pon farr." His voice was husky; speech was obviously an effort for him. "May I have some water?"

His hands shook so that he could not hold the glass. I knelt at his side and lifted it to his lips. He drank thirstily, then lay back in the chair.

"Are you ill, Mr. Spock? Shall I call the doctor?"

"That will not be necessary. Even Dr. McCoy could not help me."

"What's wrong? Is there anything I can do?"

"Nothing. I can cope with this - it will pass shortly."

I thought then that he would send me away, but after a moment

he went on. "I should explain. It is not the pon farr, but there is a connection. You know the price we Vulcans must pay for our freedom from emotion, but there are times when our feelings *must* be expressed. Normally an adult male would be able to do this through his relationship with his wife. You must understand that I do not now speak of a physical relationship but of the emotional satisfaction we achieve through the mind link. For me, as you know, such a release is not possible. I am in no danger; it is merely an uncomfortable and distressing experience, but it will pass. Do not be concerned for me."

His eyes closed again. Still kneeling at his side I looked into his face. I supposed I should leave him to his lonely struggle, but somehow I could not. Perhaps he would not accept my help, but I must offer it. I touched his hand.

"For whatever reason, you are suffering. Let me help."

The words seemed to echo strangely in the quiet room. A memory came softly, then faded. He was very still, and I waited for the rejection I was sure must come. Then his fingers touched mine for an instant.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I believe you can help me, but you must know what is involved. Our minds will be one; you will share the emotions that torment me. I know that I can trust you... but can you accept me as I am?"

"You have done so much for all of us on the Enterprise. It is little enough to do in return."

He nodded gravely; his hands reached for my face, and the mind link was established.

Of the emotions and memories I shared with Spock that evening, I do not have the right to speak; but I learned much. I had often wondered idly how it had been for him, growing up as a physical, intellectual and emotional half breed; now I knew. The uncomprehending bewilderment of the child, the painful struggles of the young man, the final acceptance of the adult Spock became - all these were now clear to me. Where he had found that calm serenity I will never know, but I realised how hard the fight had been, how great the victory. To be able to call this man 'friend' was indeed a privilege.

When the emotional storm quietened at last and the link dissolved, we looked at each other with new eyes. I think we both knew that our relationship could never be the same again. It had been based on mutual respect; now was added a complete understanding and acceptance. Neither of us would ever feel totally alone again.

In the morning he was once again the Mr. Spock I had known for so long - cool, detached, unemotional. Neither of us made any reference to the events of the previous evening, and the rest of the voyage passed as it had begun. Indeed, in the bustle of my return

to the ship, and the involvement in taking up my duties again, it slipped to the back of my mind for a time.

Only when I was at last alone in my quarters and had time to think did the full implications of that evening come home to me; and that was when the questions began, the questions I *must* answer, for I cannot delay any longer - the man facing me is waiting.

It was not the por farr; but for a few terrible moments I thought it was.

And if it had been;

If, for those hours, I had been the only one he could turn to;

If I had been the only one who understood what he needed;

What would I have done?

That is the question that haunts me. And I know the answer. For the eyes of James Kirk, the eyes in the mirror, look back at me with understanding.

Then, consider. Consider how much I owe him already, and understand - no sacrifice, however great, however frightening, could begin to pay the debt I owe him.

WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE DONE?

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THE MISSING COLONY

by

Sheila Clark

There had been a small colony on Veda for some twenty years -- long enough for it to be regarded as no longer experimental, but definitely, permanently, established. However, contact with the settlement had been lost, and the Enterprise was diverted to investigate.

"Could plague of any sort be responsible?" Kirk asked McCoy as the ship swung onto the new heading.

"Unlikely, Jim," McCoy replied. "They'd all be vaccinated against all known diseases before they arrived, and any native diseases they weren't protected against would show up in the first two or three years of settlement. Besides, Veda has no life forms high enough in the evolutionary scale to be likely to affect Humans."

"That's not an infallible rule," Kirk commented.

"I agree with Dr. McCoy," Spock put in unexpectedly. "The likelihood of such a disease appearing after twenty years is extremely small. I am inclined to suspect that it could be a simple communications problem, a malfunction requiring nothing more than a few minutes of Lt. Uhura's skill to repair."

The landing party materialised on the outskirts of the Vedan colony's main settlement. Unlike many colonies which spread their inhabitants over a fairly large area with two or three centres, this one had kept to one area and was spreading out gradually from it as more land was put under cultivation. The place was deserted.

The houses were made of native wood, sturdy and well built; each had a garden in which crops of vegetables were growing, with, here and there, a splash of colour where someone had spared a narrow border to put in a few flowers. In some of the fields beyond, half grown grain shimmered in the wind. Everything was quiet; there was no sound of animal or bird or insect to augment the sigh of the wind across the fields and the movement of distant branches.

"As if they'd just left everything and gone away," Kirk murmured.

"The Mary Celeste," Spock said.

"What?" McCoy asked.

"An old Earth story. A ship found deserted, everything normal on board -- but no sign of her crew. No-one ever did find out what happened."

McCoy looked at him. Spock was full of surprises; at times like this, McCoy found himself wondering how Spock would have

developed had he been brought up on Earth; then he realised that the paradox of seeing everyone behaving in the very manner that he was being taught was wrong could have driven Spock insane.

"They had cattle," Spock was saying now, as if the previous exchange had never happened. "Where are they?"

"In those barns, perhaps?" Uhura asked.

"Unlikely, Lieutenant," Kirk replied. "In these climatic conditions, it would be easier to keep the beasts out of doors - and reasonably close, too, for ease of access for milking. There should be some in those nearby fields that look to be lying fallow."

"What about native wild life?" McCoy asked. "It's primitive, but surely there should be some?"

"Not necessarily, Doctor," Spock said. "If the colonists were killing off the local fauna - an unnecessary proceeding, but quite likely behaviour for Humans if the creatures were raiding the crops - it would take a little time for them to gain enough confidence to return to here, the centre of their destruction."

"That's possible for most animals," McCoy agreed, "but there are always a few creatures that men can regard as... as pets, or are harmless and realise they can get easy pickings around houses. There should be something... some native equivalent of a robin, perhaps."

"Bones is right, Spock," Kirk said. "There's bound to have been some beast that reminded the colonists of home. They wouldn't kill those - they're more likely to feed them. Whatever Vulcans might do, that's the Human reaction."

The landing party scattered to search the village.

Kirk and McCoy went into one house. Everything was tidy, but in an incomplete sort of way. A laid table was mute evidence that whatever had happened, had happened suddenly. There was a plentiful store of food - dried, smoked and apparently salted.

"Spock was right with his comparison," Kirk said. "I can think of another case from Old Earth; three lighthouse keepers who disappeared. There was a laid table there, too, if I remember. They were on a tiny island; it was searched thoroughly, but there was no sign of the men. No clues..."

"There must have been something - something that was overlooked," McCoy said, suddenly impatient with the mysticism that had gripped first Spock, and now Kirk.

Kirk shook his head. "The place was thoroughly searched," he repeated. "There were dozens of suggestions put forward, but it remains a mystery."

"We do know one thing here, anyway," McCoy went on. "They didn't leave because their food supplies were running low."

Kirk nodded. "Plenty stores; and the gardens were full of vegetables, too. Nearly ready to harvest. No, it certainly wasn't a food shortage."

They investigated several houses. All were the same as the first - tidy, well-stocked with food - as if their owners had merely slipped out for a few hours. As they went, Spock and Uhura joined them, having found nothing in any of the empty barns. All were empty except for the stored fodder.

"Stores again," Kirk said. "They wouldn't have stored fodder unless they had animals. What happened?"

At last they came to one house that was different.

The bodies of two women lay there. Both were skeleton thin: neither had been dead for long.

"Two days at the most," McCoy said. "If we'd been sent just a couple of days earlier, I could have saved them."

"We were sent as soon as Starfleet was certain there was a breakdown in communications," Kirk said. "They couldn't have sent us earlier or they'd have sent us before the colony was actually out of touch."

McCoy shook his head. "Official bodies have one speed," he said. "They probably waited for a week before deciding that anything was wrong."

"That can happen," Spock said. "But the Captain is right. This time, at least, Starfleet moved quickly. It was the distance that killed them."

McCoy still looked unconvinced as Uhura returned from the kitchen. "There's no food through there," she said.

"There's something odd here," Kirk said. "They must have known, when their food ran out, that they could get more, either from the garden or by raiding the house next door. Yet they chose to starve to death. Why?"

"The colony could have developed strict customs of privacy or honesty," Spock suggested.

"In twenty years? Unlikely," Kirk said. "Certainly not when no-one else was there, and anyway, no custom holds when starvation is in question."

"There is a more likely possibility," Spock said. "They may have been afraid to leave the security of their own house. Humans - females in particular - are frequently illogical. They may have preferred to remain here - where they felt safe - even though they were starving. Perhaps long after whatever endangered them had gone. They may have lacked the courage to investigate; I have noticed that Human females often prefer shivering in fear to investigating whatever has alarmed them."

"That may be true of a lot of women," McCoy said, "but these ones were colonists. They had deliberately chosen a possibly dangerous life; they weren't the psychological type to be afraid of shadows."

"But whatever harmed the other colonists wasn't a shadow," Spock said. "They probably saw what it was... and it terrified them."

"Yes," Kirk said. "It's a good suggestion; but what could make them so afraid? There was nothing in the survey reports that gave any indication of anything dangerous to Man."

"There are two possibilities," Spock said slowly. "Some species have protective coloration, either for protection against predators or to permit them to approach their prey unobserved. If this planet has a predator that looks absolutely harmless - for example, a slow-moving coelenterate closely resembling a tree - a survey party could land and fail to identify it as a danger, especially if it was comparatively rare, and in good faith give the planet a clean report. Eventually - after twenty years - a group of these creatures reaches here. The colonists would be unprepared, might find it impossible to differentiate between genuine trees and these possible coelenterates, those two choosing to hide here, others fleeing - perhaps into another group of the creatures..."

"If these creatures were so slow-moving they'd still be in the vicinity," McCoy objected. "We'd see them."

"Indeed yes, but, like the colonists, how could we recognise anything other than trees? In addition, they would have moved far enough away, by now, for them not to attack us."

"Another hypothesis, which I prefer, is the possibility of a life form with two distinct stages; a harmless one, perhaps larval, lasting for many years, and an adult stage of a few days when the creature is dangerous. Think of Earth's many biting insects; the adult female must suck blood before she can lay fertile eggs. On Earth they are primarily an annoyance, although some do transmit disease. The survey party, only seeing the larval stage, could easily fail to realise that metamorphosis occurs - or, quite simply, fail to realise that the adult form could be dangerous."

"But surely there would be adult forms every year," McCoy protested.

"Not necessarily," Spock said. "There is one Earth insect - the mayfly; adults are only seen for a period of approximately two weeks in the spring of each year. For the rest of the year there are only larva. There is a Vulcan species with a two-year cycle; there are adults for a few days every second year. A cycle in excess of twenty years does seem a trifle lengthy, but there are certainly precedents on a smaller scale."

Further discussion was stopped by the arrival of the security men who had been searching the perimeter of the village. One of them reported finding a pawmark.

"It's huge, sir," the guard reported. "Like a big lion. There are some bones too, broken and scratched - an animal of some kind. Must be one of the beasts belonging to the colony."

McCoy examined the bones carefully, before reporting them to be those of a cow, and the marks consistent with their having been chewed by some large carnivore.

"But there aren't any," Uhura protested. "And the colonists wouldn't bring any dangerous animals with them - would they?"

Spock, examining the pawmark curiously, said, "They might bring

rats for experimental purposes, to test the effects of local flora on Terran life. Rats could become dangerous if they escaped, if only for lack of predators to keep their numbers within bounds - but not only is this the wrong size, rats do not leave this shape of pawmark." He pulled out his communicator. "Spock to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"Sensor probe on this area, Mr. Scott. Is there any feline life nearby?"

There was a brief pause. Then - "There is, Mr. Spock. About two miles away, bearing two mark seven four. There are also Human life form readings almost overlapping the feline reading."

They stared round at each other.

"Can you lock on to the Human readings?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, Captain. The feline ones are too close."

"We'll have to do it from the ground, then."

They set off. Although they could have beamed up and back down closer, they had no way of knowing how much cover they would get from the terrain; Kirk had no wish to expose his party to whatever danger the felines offered.

Eventually they topped a rise and found themselves gazing down on a large group of what looked like double-sized lions... no, more like sabre-toothed tigers - they were striped and the huge canine teeth looked very prominent, even from that distance. The beasts were prowling round and round a huge heap of rocks, backwards and forwards, restlessly waiting. Then one of them gave a gigantic yawn, giving the watching group an excellent view of a magnificent set of teeth.

"Fascinating," Spock commented. "Where did these creatures come from? Even an incompetent survey team could not have missed those."

"Never mind where they came from," McCoy growled. "What are we going to do about the people they have trapped?"

"They must be from the colony - and in a pretty weak condition from lack of food," Kirk said. "The big cats have them pinned down - the beasts must be too big to get in among the rocks, and lack the intelligence to realise that it's no use waiting, because they'll never get in." He thought for a moment. "If Scotty can't lock onto them, one of us will have to get to them, to give him an exact co-ordinate."

Spock said promptly, "I'll go, Captain."

"No, Mr. Spock. I don't propose to risk any of your lives. You will all beam back to the Enterprise."

"Jim - " McCoy began.

"That was not a request, Doctor, it was an order," he said. He pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here."

"Beam up the rest of the landing party, Scotty. I won't be coming just yet."

He stepped back from the others. Seconds later, he was alone.

He looked at the pile of rocks and the prowling carnivores, raising a hand to test the wind. That was all right; it seemed to be blowing steadily from the rocks towards him. He turned his attention back to the pacing beasts.

There was a definite pattern to their movements. Then one broke the pattern; it lay down. It remained watchful, but at least it was static. Then another lay down, and another. Soon only four remained on their feet.

Kirk crept back over the rise, carefully keeping below the skyline, and ran for some yards. Carefully, he crawled back to the top of the rise. The rocks were now between him and the animals.

He lay still for a moment, weighing the pros and cons of a dash as opposed to a careful crawl towards the rocks. It was easy to reach a decision. No matter how fast he ran, once the beasts saw him they would be able to outpace him easily. He began to wriggle forwards.

Twice he had to stop as a beast looked towards him. The second time, he was sure the creature had seen movement, and he lay in an agony of uncertainty until it looked away again. Even then he remained motionless for a minute more, in case it was cunning enough to pretend it was no longer paying attention to him. But apparently it wasn't, for it did not look back.

He wriggled on. At last he reached a point where he could no longer see the beasts for the rocks.

He could go faster now, but even so he had to freeze in a heart-stopping alarm when a carnivore padded round the edge of the rocks and into view. He felt horribly conspicuous. The creature didn't look towards him, however; its attention was wholly taken up by the victims trapped among the rocks, and after a couple of minutes it padded back out of sight. He took a deep, relieved breath, and went on.

When he reached the rocks, he crawled in between them, conscious of considerable relief. He squeezed his way through the cracks between the rocks, and soon came in sight of the refugees.

They were crouching among the rocks, staring at the giant carnivores, barely out of reach of a probing paw; eight of them, painfully thin. In addition, there were several bodies. They must have been sheltering here for quite some time. Kirk could not help but remember McCoy's words... *If we'd been sent just a couple of days earlier...*

Kirk kicked a stone. One of the men jerked round, terror on his face. He gasped with relief when he saw it was just another man.

"You'll soon be safe," Kirk said. He pulled out his communicator.

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From the story the survivors told, the position became clear. The big cats were, quite literally, that. One of the colonists had taken his pet cat when he joined the colony. In fairness to the man, he hadn't known the animal was pregnant; he had thought simply to take the family pet, which was very attached to his family, along, thinking no harm, believing that when it died there would be no more cats on Veda.

Even then, he had intended drowning the litter when it appeared, but enough people offered them homes for him to change his mind. But of course, they had bred; the next generation of kittens had been larger than the first, and one of the females had gone feral. By the third generation, they realised that they had a problem; the cats were now as big as a medium-sized dog. All the subsequent kittens were destroyed and the adults spayed. However, the feral female had also bred, and about her kittens they could do nothing. Occasionally they caught sight of the feral beasts, getting larger with each generation, but they hadn't fully realised the danger that was developing. When the giant cats had eventually attacked, driven to it by lack of native prey animals large enough to support their appetites, they had killed the handful of tame cats left as well as the cattle and several of the settlers. Most of the colonists had scattered - these few had been lucky to find shelter. They knew a rescue ship must eventually arrive, although they had begun to fear that it would not arrive in time to save any of them.

"Were there any children born in the colony?" McCoy asked. First settlers often had none, waiting until they were certain the planet was wholly suitable for colonisation before bringing children onto it.

"A few," Cleary, the senior of the survivors, said.

"How was their size?"

"Odd you should ask," Cleary said. "They were all getting pretty tall."

"Then you're well away from there," McCoy said. "There must be something there that causes gigantism,"

"The cattle were all right."

"Among meat-eaters, then. You'd have had to leave eventually, or your descendants would have been a completely different race."

"It won't be possible for us to go back, then, even if we find some way of getting rid of the cats?"

"I wouldn't advise it. Our biology and science sections will try to pinpoint what was responsible, but all the good that'll do will give the survey boys something else to check out."

Cleary nodded. "A pity, though. It was a good place. Until the cats attacked."

"In a way, they did you eight a favour." (No more survivors had been detected.)

"How?"

"Cats breed so fast they showed up the condition pretty quickly. Without them, you'd have been into your third or fourth

generation - sixty years, at least, instead of twenty - before you realised what was happening."

"Yet it's twenty years lost," Cleary said.

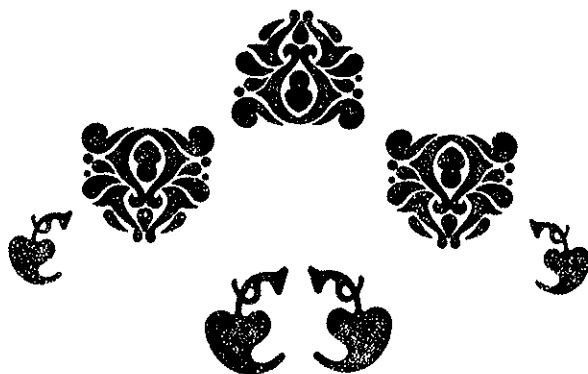
Kirk, who had come in unobserved, said quietly, "No, not lost. You did accomplish something, my friends. The colony was well developed. You have the experience. You can probably find positions in any new colony without any difficulty." He smiled at them. "We'll be leaving orbit soon - is there anything you want to collect from the village?"

The survivors looked at each other. "No," Cleary said for them all. "As you said, we have the experience. That's all we need to take with us."

Kirk nodded and turned back towards the door. "If there's anything you need, Dr. McCoy will get it for you. I'll be on the Bridge if you want me." He went out, and headed along the corridor towards the elevator. He got in.

"Bridge," he said. The turbolift moved upwards, carrying him back to duty.

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THERE'S ALWAYS SOMETHING YOU CAN TRADE

by

Sheila Clark

A spear flashed; the young water mammal writhed, impaled, its blood staining the water to opaqueness. As the victim's death throes ceased, the hairy humanoid hauled the carcass from the water. More blood ran from the gaping wound the ugly barbs had torn in the delicate flesh. The hunter bent to the wound, licking avidly at the warm blood, too intent on his meal to see the grey adult head that stared unblinkingly at him from a hundred yards away. Then as the hunter raised his head, tongue-tip reaching for the blood that adhered to his lips and beard, the head disappeared silently under the water and was gone.

The hunter hauled the spear out of the body, the barbs tearing the flesh further. He pulled a blunt knife made of whetted bone from the matted tangle of his hair and hacked off a piece of the torn flesh, which he munched, raw and warm as it was, while he heaved the carcass onto his shoulder. Blood dripped down to dry stickily on the hair of his body.

Carrying the spear easily in his free hand, he strode through the soft-stemmed vegetation of his world, automatically adjusting his balance as the waves rolled under the huge floating island of matted weed that was his home.

The planet provided paradoxical readings. On the one hand, sensors indicated that intelligent life was present; that lush vegetation was widespread. Yet the single huge continent was entirely barren. Only the simplest of plants clung to an uncertain foothold on the shoreline. There were ruins on the continent, ruins of vast cities. Machinery poked half rusted signs of its presence into the air from its graveyard of windblown detritus. In more 'rural' areas there were skeletons too, many of them with sundried skin still covering the bones. These bodies had also, it seemed, been buried and exhumed by natural forces. Here and there were the graveyards of huge forests, marked by the occasional branchless trunk standing tall and weather-bleached. The ground was desert dry; the wind experienced no difficulty in blowing the topsoil from here to there and back again. It needed little imagination or intelligence to realise that some sudden disaster had overtaken this world.

"Readings indicate that the catastrophe occurred fully ten planetary centuries ago," Spock reported.

"But... Spock, all that metal should have rusted into nothing in a thousand years," Kirk protested.

"Not necessarily," Spock replied calmly. "For oxidation to occur, moisture must also be present. I would estimate that there has been little or no precipitation for practically the whole of

that period."

"He means it's been a long, dry summer," McCoy translated.

Spock pointedly ignored the Doctor. He swung his tricorder carefully around, circling as he did so.

"The vegetation must grow on islands," he said at last as he stopped moving, facing the sea. "The inhabitants of this world must also live on these islands. I detect intelligence... humanoid life... "

Even from the Enterprise, it proved impossible to pinpoint any of the islands, however. No land, however small its area, could be detected anywhere except the huge barren continent - and yet the vegetation readings continued, strong and clear. And, anomalously, the readings were not static. They came and went, without any detectable pattern.

"All right," Kirk said impatiently when Spock finally admitted defeat and straightened from the sensor with an expression very indicative of chagrin. "We'll go down by shuttle. Then we can chase these elusive islands if we have to!"

The Galileo took off with its full complement of seven - Kirk, Spock, McCoy, a junior scientist (Bayliss) and three guards, Dawson, Shiras and Carlsen. It dropped easily through the atmosphere, Spock's skillful hand at the controls, and flew over the ocean a few hundred feet above the surface.

At last they detected a huge mass of vegetation near them and Spock swung the shuttle towards it. He took the Galileo lower, and landed in a small clearing beside the shore. Tall tree-like growths towered above them, but a quick check showed these 'trees' to be soft-stemmed growths - indeed, they more nearly resembled overgrown grasses than trees in their structure.

Spock left the study of the vegetation to his subordinate and concentrated on discovering more about the strange island on which they found themselves.

"The island is definitely moving," he announced at last. "It appears to consist entirely of vegetation. It would seem that it is a thick raft of matted vegetation held together by the roots of the plants growing on it. These roots may in fact reach right through the 'island' to the water. And, of course, as each generation of plants dies, its remains add to the thickness of the raft."

A ripple of movement made the surface under them rise and fall in a long roll. They staggered, caught off balance by the unaccustomed sway under their feet, and Dawson went white and swallowed hard. The 'ground' steadied again. Spock continued as if nothing had happened. "Possibly there is a limit to how large the island may become. Probably when it reaches a certain size pieces of it break off naturally because of the strain of continually moving up and down, or parts might be broken off in a storm." He consulted his tricorder. "There are humanoid readings some four hundred yards off in that direction." He indicated 'inland'. "I estimate they live as near to the centre of their island as

possible."

"How many are there?"

"Fourteen. But, Captain... "

"Yes?"

"Although readings indicate the presence of intelligence, they also indicate a low level of culture."

"Surely that's to be expected?"

Another rolling surge under their feet made them stagger again, while Dawson swallowed again, one hand going to his mouth.

"What's wrong, Mr. Dawson?" McCoy asked as he regained his balance.

"I feel sick," Dawson muttered, only half audibly. He looked a little ashamed of himself.

"Some Humans have very low tolerance for uneven movement," Spock offered. "It is known for particularly susceptible individuals to become nauseated while travelling on absolutely motionless water."

"He means some people get seasick easily," McCoy translated. "Don't let it worry you, Mr. Dawson. Some individuals are particularly susceptible to nausea after injections of drugs commonly regarded as having no side effects." He glanced slyly at the Vulcan as he spoke, even as he reached for his medikit. He selected a hypo, adjusted it, and gave the white-faced guard a shot. "That should help."

"Thanks, Doctor."

Kirk looked directly at his Science Officer. "What level of culture do these people have?"

Spock looked doubtful. "I would say... pre-Stone Age."

"Pre-Stone Age? I thought Stone Age was the most primitive culture possible?"

"There is an earlier level, where the race concerned simply picks up whatever comes to hand and discards it after use. Even some animals are known to do that. From there it is a short step to retaining a particularly useful stone or semi-working a bone or a branch. A true Stone Age culture arises when materials are regularly shaped for a specific purpose and retained for that use until they break; and indeed, such a culture can be surprisingly sophisticated and their tools surprisingly skillfully crafted. Here, however, there is no stone. Any tools these people have must be made of wood or bone. They may have reached the beginning of a Stone Age; however, they cannot be more advanced than that."

"Which still leaves one question." Kirk caught at a 'tree' to steady himself as another long wave of movement rippled the island, and nearly fell as the soft stem crumpled under his grasp. He regained his balance and went on. "Could a race evolve... in these conditions?"

"I think it... unlikely, Captain." Spock adjusted his balance neatly and easily. "It is more likely that these are the primitive descendants of the people who once lived on the continent."

Dawson sat down abruptly as a sharp gust of wind caught the floating island and blew it sideways at right angles to the direction of the water's movement. Bayliss caught at Carlsen's arm as that guard staggered dizzily, steadying him. As McCoy turned to inject Carlsen, too, Kirk muttered, so low that only Spock heard, "How did we manage to get two guards on this trip who are liable to sea-sickness?"

"It could have been worse, Captain," Spock murmured. "All three might have been susceptible. Come to that, the entire party might have become seasick. Myself excluded, of course."

Kirk threw him a disgusted look, then staggered himself as another gust of wind swung the raft of vegetation sideways again. A small piece of it, perhaps two yards across, broke away. It bobbed along beside its parent for some seconds before the combined action of wind and waves carried it onto a diverging course.

Spock, who seemed to have adapted to the conditions as if born to them, steadied Kirk. The ground stopped moving, except for a residual tremor under their feet, and Kirk went on. "Where are these natives?"

"This way, Captain."

A sleek grey head that none of them had noticed watched them vanish into the 'forest', their feet sinking deeply into the soft, half-rotting carpet of vegetation as they went.

They came on the natives suddenly, without any real preliminary warning, walking out from the shelter of the trees into an unexpectedly large clearing.

The natives were gathered round the remains of a reasonably sized carcass from which they were feeding. There seemed to be little distinction in rank in the small tribe; a male, three females, and seven half-grown children were all clustered round, hacking intently at the body with crude bone knives, elbowing each other aside to get at the raw flesh. The male cuffed aside one of the youngsters, a half-grown boy who reached for a portion the male had obviously earmarked for himself; the juvenile shook himself and pushed aside one of his younger sisters. Only three very small children were not pushing in but lay or crawled at the outskirts of the group. One of the females turned to throw a scrap of meat to the oldest of the three, and saw the strangers. She uttered a snarling yelp and the others looked at her then turned to find out what had taken her attention.

The male moved forward, growling, his lips drawn back to show what could only be called fangs in a threatening snarl.

This was no time to make protestations of peaceful intent. These beings clearly had no language; the male clearly regarded them as a threat to his family group. A quick glance showed that the females seemed equally ready to fight.

"Back away," Kirk said softly, hoping that the hairy male would

take their retreat as a sign that they accepted his dominance on this island.

The men backed away steadily; but this humanoid seemed not to recognise retreat. He kept on coming.

Kirk reached for his communicator; the great ape-like creature seemed to see that as a threat and flung the bone knife he was still holding. It knocked the communicator from Kirk's hand.

"Get away!" he snapped to the others. He dropped to his knees to grope in the soft leaf mould for the communicator. Spock hesitated. "Go on, Spock! Get away!"

"Your communicator isn't important, Jim. Leave it!"

Then, before either could move, the humanoid was on Kirk, fangs tearing. Spock snatched out his phaser.

It was impossible to fire without hitting Kirk as well. But even seeing this, Spock did not hesitate. He fired his phaser, automatically set at 'stun'. Kirk went limp instantly; the big alien male seemed unaffected. He worried the limp body for a moment longer, then dropped it and turned on Spock.

There was nothing the Vulcan could do except run. But, since he had attacked the beast - if in fact it had recognised his action as hostile - it would regard him as a danger. Or did it simply regard him as food? Either way, he could lead it away from the others, give *them* a chance of escape. He turned and ran at right angles to the direction of the shuttlecraft.

Only the male followed him. The others began to gather about the Captain's limp body.

McCoy and the others had not seen what had happened. Already behind Kirk and Spock, they were much nearer the 'trees' and had already lost sight of the clearing before Kirk lost his communicator. They proceeded to obey Kirk's last order, and made their way directly back to the shuttlecraft, pausing only when the movement under their feet increased enough for them to lose their balance. They crowded in, to wait in growing anxiety for the others.

Those same ground movements bothered Spock too in his flight, and his hairy pursuer, with a lifetime of adaptation to these conditions to help him, quickly gained on him. The Vulcan realised that he would be unable to follow his original intention of dodging the creature so that he could return to attempt to aid Kirk - if the Captain were still alive. His memory of the tooth-torn gashes on Kirk's neck was painfully acute. Soon he, too, would be caught - and strong though he was, he guessed that the ape-like alien was stronger. There was only one possibility of escape. His path took him close to the water's edge. Without pausing, he dived in, swimming strongly under water for as far as he could before coming up to gasp breathlessly, his lungs straining for air. For some seconds he could only pant helplessly as he trod water weakly, feeling dizzy and his sight blurred by the strain he had put on his body.

Then as his sight cleared, Spock saw that he had not escaped after all. The hairy head of the humanoid was close to him - too close - and coming closer. He began to swim, still feeling breathless from the dive following his run - short though it had been, it had been a very fast sprint. He failed to draw away from the ape-man; and the chill of the water was beginning to bite. If only he could stop long enough to get his communicator and have himself beamed up...

The females and young gathered curiously around Kirk's body, puzzled by its hairlessness. One of the young licked the blood on the smooth neck, but more out of curiosity to discover what this strange creature's blood tasted like than from any real hunger, for their appetites had already been satisfied. The females soon lost interest, returning to their youngest offspring, the biggest of which had found its way to the half eaten carcass and was investigating it with fingers and tongue. His mother began to scrape slivers of flesh off the bones for him; the other mothers lifted their young to suckle them.

The other young prowled round the new body for a little longer, but soon they too lost interest, and moved away in rough play.

Kirk regained consciousness to the unpleasant after-effects of a phaser stun, a tearing pain in his left shoulder and neck and a weakness that left him disinclined to move. He lay motionless for a minute while he recalled the events leading up to his collapse. He realised he had been stunned - why, then, when his assailant collapsed, had his men - man - Spock? - not carried him off back to safety?

He turned his head slightly, and bit back a gasp of pain as the movement hurt his bitten neck.

The three females crouched, wholly intent on their young. One of the juvenile males was in the process of disappearing into the 'forest'. There was no sign of the other young ones nor of the huge male... nor of his men.

Gritting his teeth against the pain, blessing the soft plant debris that covered the ground and would effectively silence his movements, he began to crawl away, one eye on the maternal group nearby. They were far too intent on their young, however, to notice him. For a moment, Kirk wondered at their carelessness, then realised that their singlemindedness probably indicated quite low intelligence, an inability to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. Besides that, they most probably thought that he was dead. Who would expect a dead body to get up and walk away?

Kirk reached the cover of the 'trees' and scrambled to his feet. Swaying, staggering from a combination of weakness and the periodic heaving of the ground under him, he made his unsteady way back to the landing site.

The shuttlecraft was still there.

McCoy had taken command by virtue of his rank, since there was

no senior officer in line of command present. He reported what had happened to Scott, then settled down anxiously to wait, considering it the best thing he could do. Privately, he decided that if there was no sign of the other two within half an hour, he was going back to look for them, no matter what.

However, long before the half hour was up, Kirk appeared. McCoy took one horrified look and rushed to Kirk's side, to support him back to the shuttle.

He eased Kirk into a seat and ran a scanner over him, then gave him two quick injections.

"What happened, Jim?"

"I don't really know, Bones. Ouch!"

"Sorry, Jim, but I've got to see to those gashes... "

"Where - ow! - where's Spock?"

"He's not here, Jim. He must have fallen behind us; until we got here, I thought you were both with us."

Kirk frowned. "The big male attacked me just after I ordered you all away. Someone used a phaser on the brute and knocked me out as well. When I came round I wondered why I was still lying there. Most of the tribe had gone. Spock... Spock must have led them off, I suppose."

"So where is he now?" McCoy was beginning to look really uneasy.

They looked at each other, the same thought in both their minds. Caught? Killed?

Kirk looked over at Bayliss. "See if you can detect Mr. Spock anywhere around, Lieutenant. Alive... or dead."

"Aye, sir," Bayliss moved to stand outside the door of the shuttle, tricorder busy.

He swung it steadily through a hundred and eighty degrees, from water's edge round the entire island to water's edge again, and back.

"Captain, there's no sign of Mr. Spock anywhere on the island."

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other. *Spock... eaten already?*

Two of the juvenile males appeared at the edge of the 'trees'. They stared at the shuttle, but seemed to accept it with little more than passing curiosity. They were more intent on the occupants - specifically Bayliss, standing outside it.

"Get back into the shuttle, Mr. Bayliss."

The scientist needed no telling. He was already turning to re-enter even as Kirk spoke. The door slammed in the faces of the two savages.

"Now they know we're here," Kirk said dully, "they won't leave. They think we're food. There's nothing we can do to help

Spock. Even if he got here, they'd get him before he could reach the shuttle. Prepare to take off."

Spock turned onto his back and kicked out strongly while he groped for his communicator. He raised it, fumbling awkwardly with chilled, uncertain fingers. The numbness betrayed him; the communicator, still unopened, slipped from his grasp to sink irretrievably. He looked once, almost despairingly, at the apelike head drawing steadily closer - in time to see it vanish smoothly, as if pulled under by some irresistible force. What flesh-eating monster lurked in the sea? Whatever it was, he could not hope to escape it if it attacked him, too. He could only hope that its hunger was satisfied by its first victim. He turned and began to swim, more slowly now, back towards the island.

It was some minutes before he realised that he was getting no nearer to it; in fact, if anything he was further away from it than when he'd started. It took him only a moment to realise why. Urged forward by a combination of wind and current, it was travelling faster than he could swim.

Then he saw the shuttle lifting from among the 'trees' a little to his right. It rose steadily, moving at an angle that took it further away from him.

For a moment, he knew despair. He knew that they would not abandon him; but it was probable that they considered him already dead.

A sleek grey seal-like head surfaced beside him with an abruptness that startled him. The creature indicated quite unmistakably that he should take hold of it; he did so, wrapping his arms around it and locking his numb fingers firmly together, and was towed rapidly to the island. The creature indicated that it meant to go under water; he took a deep breath just before he was pulled under.

The seal-like creature towed him under the island and then upwards. They surfaced in a dim 'cave' hollowed out of the vegetable matter that formed the island. With the last of his strength, Spock dragged himself onto a sort of ledge just above the water, where several of the seals already lay. His rescuer humped limblessly out of the water beside him.

"My thanks," he said quietly. Why had the beast helped him? He couldn't think. Perhaps a mind meld?

He reached out and put a tentative hand on the seal's head, and gasped.

This was the intelligent species the sensors had detected! Not the apelike humanoids, but the seals. Intelligent... with a high level of telepathic culture... poetry... music... and all in the mind.

They were preyed on by the humanoids who lived on all the islands. But they needed the islands to live on, too; the barren continent was death, it was too dry...

"Why did you help me?" Spock asked.

The savage one who killed my youngest son sought you also for his prey.

"Where did these savages come from?"

They came originally from the dry land. There was a climatic change, though we do not know what caused it. At that time they were intelligent, and left us alone; but hundreds of years, living the way they were forced to do, with brother mating sister because they could find no-one else, seems to have destroyed their intelligence. Now they are animals.

Spock nodded his understanding. He had been right. "Is there anything my people can do for yours?"

He sensed the creature's gratitude. I thank you for my people, but no. There is nothing. The legged ones did not ask to become savages; they must live somewhere. They sometimes see us in the water - they do not know we live in the ground under them. And we are watchful. Only the very unwary young are killed. There was resignation in the thought.

"Is there no way that you could live on the continent? Are there no caves there?"

The rocks are hard. We cannot dig there - only in the soft matter of the islands.

"If my people dug you caves, would you live there?"

Your people could do that? Disbelief, mixed with hope.

"Easily." Spock hesitated. "But I must first make contact with my own people. Unfortunately I lost my communicating device. They will have to find me - and I very much fear that they consider me dead."

When they reached the Enterprise, McCoy hustled Kirk off to Sickbay. As he went, Kirk called back,

"Scotty - initiate a search for Spock... alive or dead."

"Aye, Captain." Scott's voice was cut short by the closing door of the transporter room. He looked at Bayliss. "Can you give me any coordinates for where you lost Mr. Spock?" he asked.

The young scientist hesitated. "It was on one of the floating islands, Mr. Scott. The island was being blown along pretty fast."

"Then the sooner you tell me where it was, laddie, the better."

Scott passed the coordinates on to the Bridge, then headed there himself at top speed. He walked onto the Bridge to find Chekov bent intently over the sensors. He straightened as Scott crossed to him.

"Nothing, sir. There are three islands in the area Mr. Bayliss told us. I can read humanoids on all three, but there are no Vulcan readings - either alive or dead."

Scott took a deep breath. "Mr. Spock has to be down there somewhere, laddie. Keep on looking."

"Yes, Mr. Scott." Chekov bent over the sensors again. Scott moved restlessly to the command chair.

"Mr. Scott... "

"Yes, Mr. Chekov?"

"I'm getting some strange readings, sir. The islands... They're composed of vegetable matter, and... Mr. Scott, I think Dr. McCoy should check these readings."

Scott punched the intercom. "Dr. McCoy - are you free to come to the Bridge? We want your opinion on some readings we're getting."

"I'll be right up, Scotty."

There was silence for a minute, during which Chekov, still intently studying the readings, looked more and more puzzled, until the elevator doors slid open and McCoy came onto the Bridge.

"What's this you want checked? Don't tell me you've forgotten what Vulcan readings look like!"

"No, Doctor," Chekov defended himself. "But these readings..."

McCoy bent over the sensor, and a mobile eyebrow lifted. "Amazing!" he exclaimed.

"What is it, Doctor?" Scott asked.

"Some of these plants... These readings indicate the presence of several rare - and very useful - drugs. These islands are worth harvesting... Now, what about Spock? have you found him?"

"There are no Vulcan readings that I can detect, Doctor."

"He's got to be there!" McCoy muttered. "Even that crazy Vulcan can't fly..."

"Wouldn't we have problems harvesting the islands?" Scott put in. "I mean, the landing party was attacked..."

McCoy nodded gloomily. "Yes, Scotty, we'll have problems... but those drugs could be worth it. Chekov, haven't you found Spock yet?"

"Doctor, he is not on any of those three islands," Chekov protested.

"So look further afield. He's got to be there!"

Chekov muttered something inaudible under his breath as he turned to the sensor. Privately, he was convinced that the First Officer was dead and his body already eaten. Wisely, McCoy chose not to ask the Russian to repeat himself.

"How's the Captain?" Scott went on.

"He'll do, but it was a near thing." McCoy fidgeted restlessly. "I'm not worried about him."

Had the Doctor accented the word 'him'? Scott wasn't certain.

What had happened to Spock?

Spock was, at that moment, lying between two of the seals, glad of the warmth of their bodies and wondering what had happened to Kirk. Had the sharp fangs killed the Captain? Or had he succeeded in reaching the shuttle? Spock suspected the latter from the simple fact that the shuttle had taken off...

Suddenly he felt himself caught in the familiar field of the transporter. He materialised in the transporter room, the two seals still at his side - and had to struggle to control the almost irresistible desire to grin at the stunned expression on the faces of the men waiting for him.

He sat up, laid his hands on the seals' heads and tried to explain what had happened. He could feel their discomfort at the dry heat of the ship, and looked over to Scott, who was manning the console.

"Beam my friends down again, Mr. Scott, if you would. Make sure they materialise in the water."

"Wait!" McCoy exclaimed. "They helped you?"

"An astute conclusion, Doctor. Yes, they are extremely intelligent - and increasingly uncomfortable in these dry conditions."

McCoy nodded. "Arrange to meet them somewhere down there."

"I already have," Spock replied. He moved quickly out of the transporter chamber. "Energise, Mr. Scott."

McCoy ignored the seals' shimmering away. He moved to Spock, noting the Vulcan's involuntary shiver. "Cold, Mr. Spock?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"Come on, I'll soon get you warmed up."

"I was... afraid... you would say that. What of the Captain, Doctor?"

"He'll be OK. Now, Spock - " as he led the Vulcan firmly towards the door - "what were you saying about contacting these seals again?"

"They are the intelligent life form on this planet," Spock told him as they headed along the corridor towards Sickbay. He was still dripping water as he went, although he hoped - vainly, as it happened - McCoy would not notice. "The humanoids seem to have degenerated to the point of having lost all their intelligence. They prey on the seals, mostly on the young ones. I promised the seals that we would excavate caves on the mainland where they could live free from predation."

As they turned into Sickbay, McCoy said, "Do you think they could be persuaded to do a little job for us in return?"

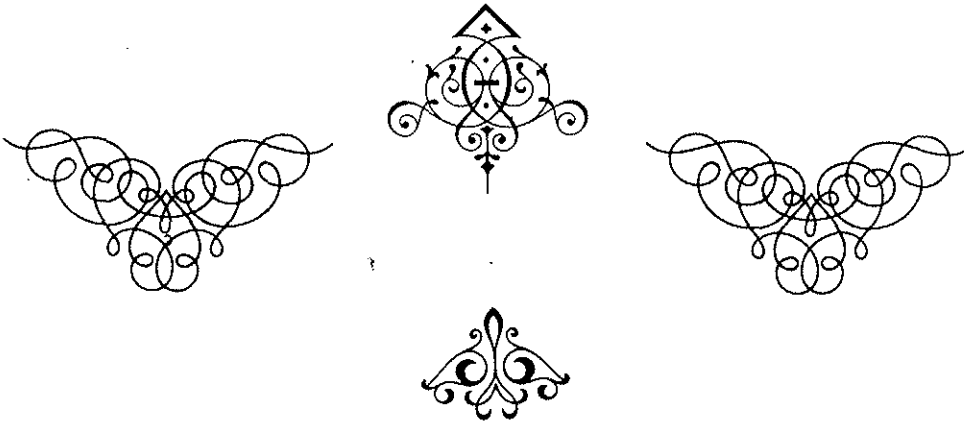
Spock's eyebrow asked a question, and McCoy explained about the drugs as he bullied the Vulcan out of his wet clothes and into a bed beside Kirk.

Spock nodded. "I am sure they would, Doctor."

The Enterprise left two days later carrying a load of plants for processing and a firm commitment to continue trading with the seals. Many more caves would be needed than the few they had provided for the group that had helped Spock, once word got round the other islands. And in time, the seals would probably discover other things that the Federation could supply to them in trade.

The seals basked happily on the rocks of the splash zone of the continent, a few yards away from the entrance of their new home. A watcher would have heard nothing; but telepathically, they were singing.

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VENITA'S STORY

by

Sheila Clark

My people are afraid of each other.

If one of us feels pain, others with whom we come in contact also feel pain. We can cure ills in others - but if this causes pain, why should we, unless the sufferer is one of our own family?

I never knew how the Vians managed to capture me; why they should pick me. I woke one day in a strange place, the Vians at my side.

Their words were meaningless sounds at first; my people cannot speak. Slowly, however, I began to understand the meaning of the sounds. They wanted me to heal others... others who were badly injured... The thought of the pain I would have to suffer terrified me.

They brought two men to me. The men were afraid; they could not understand what was happening to them.

The Vians hurt them. I don't know how. They could *will* injuries onto people, terrible injuries. How could they bear to hurt people so? I tried to help the men, I did try - I was too frightened of the Vians not to - but the men were afraid, even of me. I shrank from their fear, and they died. For a while thereafter I had peace.

One day three more men appeared. I felt immediately that they were different from the other two. One of them had a slight injury - a cut on the head. But whereas the other two had paid very little attention to each other's hurts, these men were concerned. One of them in particular tried to tend the cut, not very effectively. The other... He puzzled me. He so obviously felt concern, yet he did not express it. He looked different from the others - like no-one I had ever seen. His ears were strangely pointed.

Their concern for their hurt friend - I took the word 'friend' from their minds without wholly understanding what it meant - began to make me feel that I should do something. The cut hurt a little, but not badly. They were amazed that I could do this - and grateful. And strangely sympathetic. They seemed to want to help me. No-one had ever wanted to help me before. Not ever. I concentrated hard, trying to learn how they identified themselves. The one I had healed - the others thought of him as Jim. The one with pointed ears - they called him Spock; the other one, Bones. Strange names. They used a name for me, too - Gem. I thought as hard as I could, trying to warn them that the Vians were dangerous, but they could not receive my thoughts or feelings. Spock touched me - I learned a lot about them from the contact, but he could not understand me.

They had instruments, as the Vians did, but their instruments seemed to give them information only. With these instruments, Spock detected a way out. They took me with them. I tried to understand

why; why they should want to help me, a stranger, but I could not.

But the Vians knew. They came, and I knew our escape was only one of their illusions - and I had no way to let my... yes, my friends, know. Jim went back towards the Vians, hoping, I knew, to give us a chance to escape. Sacrificing himself... It was a new thought to me. Then the illusion broke, and Spock and Bones also knew it for what it was. They joined Jim.

The Vians told Jim that they were willing to let his friends go free. Again I knew it for a trick, but could not let them know. He agreed, then as they led him away, he turned to look at us - and although he was looking directly at us, he couldn't see us. Then we found ourselves back in my prison.

Jim was returned, badly hurt. Bones and Spock went to him, their concern, their... their love, so great it could almost be seen. Even I felt some pity for him.

Then Bones turned to me. I knew what he wanted, and I feared. pain... weakness... I could not partially heal him. He must be wholly healed, or his injuries would recur. I feared the pain, but even more, I did not know if I was strong enough to survive the weakness. Even here - fearing the Vans - I did not want to die.

The mental pain of their worry, sympathy and concern became greater than my fear. I had to help Jim.

The pain was almost unbearable. I shrank back; Bones urged me on. This time I knew it was within my ability to heal Jim - and I did.

I lay for some minutes, too weak to move, even to sit up. As soon as they were sure that Jim was healed, the others turned to me. I felt their gratitude - it healed me.

At the same time, I was worried. I knew the Vians by now; what would they do next? And sure enough, they came almost at once. They wanted Jim to choose one of the others to suffer next. They left him to think - and suffer - about it, then Bones gave him something that made him sleep.

It was difficult for me to understand the reaction of the others to the Vians' threat. Bones wanted Spock to remain with Jim, ostensibly to help him escape, and Spock... he behaved as if he wouldn't give Bones the right to do anything for him. I concentrated on them. I wanted to be sure how they felt. Bones was easy to read. He wanted to save the others. He was willing to sacrifice anything to save them. It was a new thought for me... And Spock; he was harder. I had to touch him. He felt the same. Indeed, his feelings were very deep: but he kept them at a level almost impossible to detect. Yet neither would admit, openly, how he felt. I couldn't understand. How could they bear to feel so, yet hide it?

Bones watched me. I knew then that he was reading in my face how Spock felt. He came over - and made Spock sleep too. Then he left with the Vians.

Jim and Spock did not sleep long. They were concerned for Bones - with good reason, as I knew. Meanwhile, Spock was working

on one of the Vians' instruments, which they had captured. He made it work for him; he wanted to use it to get us to safety. I read him more easily now. He wanted to get us to safety - but stay himself, to try to help Bones. Jim may have guessed too - or perhaps it was his own desire to succour his friend that decided him. He chose to go to Bones.

We found him... tied, dying. They rushed to help him, give him as much comfort as they could. I shrank from his injuries. I couldn't survive those.

The others thought - if I could strengthen Bones, partly heal him - and I had no way to tell them I couldn't. All - or nothing. Part healed would be wasted effort. I felt Spock's bitterness that he couldn't heal as I could... his feeling that it would be almost a privilege to suffer for his friend.

Pain - a privilege?

Jim tried to persuade me to help - and the Vians stopped him. They forbade him to encourage me. I had to do it by myself, because I wanted to, they said.

I did want to help, even though I got no - no satisfaction out of helping them. It was more to ease the intensity of mental pain I was suffering because of the state of their minds. Yet I knew that they got satisfaction out of making sacrifices for each other... Perhaps if I had been given time to get to know them...

The mental suffering intensified to the point where I could bear no more. I had to obtain relief - and I thought longingly of the gratitude they had given me before. I moved to Bones, and immediately felt their gratitude again that I was at least trying. It gave me strength to withstand the pain. But I weakened quickly. It was too soon after the last time. I had to regain strength. Perhaps if I was quick... perhaps I could recover a little before his injuries wholly returned...

When I returned to him, he was strong enough to try to push me away. I couldn't understand. He had been anxious for me to tend to Jim... Then I realised. He was afraid that I would die. He preferred to die himself than cause my death. Yet I was still a stranger to him...

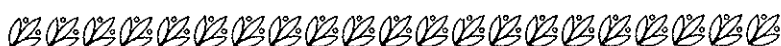
Jim was talking now to the Vians. I was too confused to know what he said - but it made the Vians themselves heal Bones.

Then they took me away. My last sight of my friends let me see their happiness, the last feelings they sent me were of relief and gratitude.

I slept. When I awoke, the Vians had gone. I lay in a sheltered place on a strange new world. I sensed my own people near; and I knew my destiny. I had to teach my people that it is no hardship to suffer for someone loved. That Love is reward enough, satisfaction enough, for any sacrifice.

It would not be easy. But thinking of the example I had been given, I knew I would persevere. And - eventually - succeed.

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THE TEETH OF THE LYNX

by

Sheila Clark

As the Enterprise swung smoothly into orbit round Alpha Lyncis III on what everyone aboard expected to be a standard survey, Kirk looked over at his First Officer.

"Sensor report, Mr. Spock."

"Standard M-class planet, Captain. Oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, gravity Earth normal. Extensive plant cover, no indications of sapient life, some signs of non-intelligent life forms. Indications of topaline deposits... Some vulcanism in the immediate neighbourhood of these... "

"Topaline? That's worth investigating."

"The area is currently in darkness, Captain."

"Until when?"

"For the next... four point seven hours, Captain."

"Hmmm. You'll be off duty by then, Mr. Spock. I'll go down with Carstairs."

"Captain - "

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

Spock hesitated, then - "It would be more logical for me to go down, Captain. I am the Science Officer - "

"Don't worry, Spock. Carstairs is perfectly capable of pinpointing topaline deposits we know are there. I know you don't mind doing extra duty - and it's easy for me to over-work you without realising it; so this time, I'm determined - Carstairs is doing the work; not you."

Spock hesitated again.

"Is there something else, Mr. Spock?"

"... No, Captain. It is not logical for me to insist... Mr. Carstairs is perfectly competent." He turned back to his console.

Kirk watched his back for a minute before swinging round. Something was definitely bothering the Vulcan... but if he was unwilling to say what it was, Kirk thought it would be better not to press him. Spock would tell him eventually... in his own good time.

When Spock went off duty, he went straight to his quarters without even pausing to eat.

He sat at his desk, fingers steepled, thinking.

The feeling of apprehension he had been experiencing ever since they achieved orbit deepened. He tried to dispel it.

This apprehension, fear almost, is not logical, he told himself. There is no reason for it. Everything is normal. It wasn't even as if the sensors had found any trace of inimical life forms. But - he admitted to himself - he would be happier if Kirk remained on board the Enterprise, and let him go down with Carstairs to the planet.

Foolishness, he told himself firmly. How could he go to Kirk with such reason-less fears, he who refused to acknowledge anything as illogical as intuition?

I have no reason to feel apprehension, he repeated to himself. It is illogical. Deliberately, he tried to put the matter out of his mind, sinking his thoughts into meditation, hoping that by doing so he could resume his normal state of emotional calmness and detachment.

Kirk collected Carstairs and two Security guards and beamed down just after planet dawn. They materialised in a sparsely-treed valley, its sides towering above them, the trees marching sedately up those sides in even files. Small bushy shrubs only a few inches high hugged the ground; many were dead, twiggy brown growths that snapped brittly under the men's feet with their every movement. Young shoots were poking their heads up from the soil among those dead plants. Kirk looked round curiously.

Some of the trees were dead too, he noticed... *No, not dead, he corrected himself.* New shoots were beginning to sprout from the seemingly lifeless, leafless branches. Something had blasted those trees, something that had killed their leaves but not the trees themselves. Something capricious that had damaged some but left others intact, in a seemingly random pattern.

He glanced at his men, checking them.

The two guards had taken up positions, one on each side of their officers, gazing outwards with an apparent casualness that Kirk knew was deceptive. Carstairs was studying his tricorder intently.

"This way, Captain."

With the guards flanking them, they headed up one side of the valley. There might be no sapient life here, but the other life forms whose presence had been detected might include dangerous animals; the guards were young, enthusiastic, and taking no chances.

There was a distant rumble, and the ground shook beneath them. The men braced themselves, then first Kirk, then Carstairs, dropped to his knees to steady himself. The guards tried harder to remain standing. One succeeded; the other staggered and fell as the ground shook again.

As everything steadied and the rumbling died away into silence, Kirk, Carstairs and the fallen guard regained their feet.

"Odd that there's no sign of an active volcano," Carstairs commented. He swung the tricorder round experimentally. "The readings show considerable instability," he went on, "though there's no surface vulcanism. I wouldn't recommend this place for mining operations, sir."

"Recommendation noted, Mr. Carstairs. But if the deposits of topaline are rich enough, no-one will pay any attention to it. And miners will be found mad enough - or greedy enough - to come and work here."

Carstairs nodded unhappily. "I know," he said. "I wish we could put a flat veto on it."

Kirk looked at him in some surprise. "As bad as that?"

"Captain, if this area doesn't throw up an active volcano shortly - say within the next decade at the outside - I miss my guess."

They moved on, following the topaline traces, until they came to an area where no plants grew. Here rock dotted dusty black earth. The plants growing round the perimeter of this blasted area looked weak, sickly, and had many dead twigs.

"Report, Mr. Carstairs."

"There is nothing to indicate the cause of this dead area, Captain," Carstairs replied slowly. He tried adjusting his tricorder, and shook his head. "Sorry, sir. Everything reads the same as back there - " he nodded back in the direction from which they had come - "apart from the absence of plants, that is."

"And the topaline?"

"About two hundred yards above us, sir."

They had covered about half the distance when the ground began shaking again, a shaking that was accompanied by a harsh, grating rumble that was more violent than the time before. It was impossible to remain on their feet. As the tremor and the noise intensified, all four dropped to hands and knees.

Carstairs managed to check his tricorder. "No sign of it slackening," he shouted above the din. Kirk nodded. His hand moved towards his communicator.

He never reached it. From a crack in the rocks just above them poured a cloud of evil-smelling, choking gas. Kirk gasped. Holding his breath, he made one final attempt to get his communicator - but the gas was too potent. The quantity already in his lungs was sufficient to poison him.

The four men collapsed and lay still. The poisonous fumes continued to pour from the crack and roll down the hillside, over the four bodies and on into the valley, to blast yet another area of vegetation and leave it dead.

When the time for their regular check had come and gone, Scott, in command, tried to contact the landing party. When he received no reply, he called Spock.

As soon as the intercom bleeped for his attention, Spock realised, with an unaccustomed sinking feeling, that the apprehension he had been unsuccessfully trying to banish was well-founded. But his voice was calm, almost supernaturally so, as he replied.

"Spock here."

"We can't raise the Captain, Mr. Spock."

"Instruct a security detail to meet me in the transporter room immediately, Mr. Scott. I will go down to look for the Captain - "

"Is that wise, Mr. Spock? If something has happened to him - "

"I am best fitted to go down, Mr. Scott, since I have greater stamina than anyone else on board the Enterprise."

"But Mr. Spock - ! ... Aye, sir."

The search party materialised at the same co-ordinates as the earlier one had done. Spock looked round quickly, noting the dead and dying vegetation, then consulted his tricorder. He picked up the topaline deposit first; then, near it, faint - very faint - life form readings.

"This way."

They started upwards, the guards fanned out round Spock, one of them, a man called Becket, in the lead. Until they knew what had happened to Kirk's party, the men were taking no chances, no chances at all, with the safety of their First Officer. They stared round intently, alert, ready for any likely contingency.

His eyes searching the slope above him, Spock moved steadily on. Then, ahead of them, he suddenly noticed a flash of yellow - Kirk's shirt? He speeded up, catching up on Becket. He could see the red shirts now, lying close to the yellow one, with blue fairly near.

Then the ground shook violently. Spock was forced to stop, to drop to one knee as he was shaken off balance. A clatter of stones, dislodged by the tremor, bounced down the slope towards Becket. Staggering, Spock lunged to his feet and forward, pushing the guard clear; but already off balance, he himself was wholly unable to take evasive action. One of the stones hit him full on the head. His last awareness before he collapsed unconscious was of Becket desperately trying to pull him clear of the falling rock.

Spock regained consciousness to a pounding headache that he found totally impossible to control. He blinked his eyes open and saw McCoy looking down at him.

One look was enough. Only one thing could make McCoy look so troubled, so unhappy. Spock closed his eyes again, knowing that Kirk was dead, and slipped back into unconsciousness.

McCoy glanced up anxiously at the fluctuating needles of the diagnostic panels and reluctantly decided that there was little he could do. He must leave it to the Vulcan's phenomenal healing powers. Unhappily, he moved back to the yellow-clad body that lay

so still on the next bed.

When Spock next regained consciousness, the headache was gone apart from a residual ache that he proceeded to ignore. He was alone in Sickbay. He sat up, aware that something was wrong... McCoy came in, and then he remembered.

Kirk was dead.

The premonition that he had forced himself to ignore because it was illogical had been proved accurate. His Captain was dead. And he might have saved him - if only he had not been so convinced that his premonition - his precognition - was illogical.

"How are you feeling, Spock?" McCoy's voice was strangely subdued.

"I am perfectly recovered, Doctor." At least his voice was decently steady.

"I'll decide that." McCoy ran his diagnostic scanner over Spock, and nodded reluctantly. "All right, Spock, you're fit enough. Just take it easy for a day or two."

"Yes, Doctor." He would have nodded instead of replying, but the faint ache in his head was persisting; he did not really feel all right.

"You're in command now, of course. Jim's body is in the morgue - we can bury him as soon as you feel up to holding the memorial service." McCoy's voice shook slightly and Spock sensed the surgeon's grief.

"It will not help to delay," he said evenly. "Have the body taken up to the chapel. The service will be... in an hour."

McCoy nodded, his eyes searching Spock's face. "Spock - Jim's dead. Don't you feel *anything*?"

"What do you expect me to feel, Doctor? I have seen the reaction of Humans to grief. Would you wish that on me?"

"I would expect more than... than apparent satisfaction that you're Captain at last!"

"Acting Captain, Doctor. I will never be the Captain." Without waiting for a reply, he walked out.

He got through the service somehow. He watched Kirk's body, wrapped in the Federation flag and attended by two space-suited guards, until the airlock door closed, then, his face more than usually masklike, he activated the outer door so that the guards could carry out their final duty and give Kirk's body into the embrace of the space that had been his life. Soon - too soon - the signal came to repressurise the airlock.

With the Captain dead, Spock set course for the nearest Starbase.

It was several days before McCoy succeeded in waylaying Spock; the Vulcan, sensing his intentions, went out of his way to avoid the

surgeon. Eventually McCoy managed to get hold of him by calling him down to Sickbay to have the almost-healed cut on his head checked - as a medical order.

McCoy's shock at Spock's changed appearance showed clearly on his face as the Vulcan entered Sickbay. "Spock - have you slept at all since...?"

"Irrelevant, Doctor. I have had... several things to consider."

"OK. Just answer me this. Why did you say you would never be Captain? You're overdue for promotion, and everyone on board would rather have you for our next Captain than a stranger - "

"I regret disappointing 'everyone', Doctor, but I am resigning my commission. I will not be available to be Captain."

"Resig... But why? Why? Spock, Jim built up the Enterprise into the best ship in the Fleet. You're ideally suited to continue his work - much though I hate to admit it. Where's the logic in resigning? In letting someone else take over who might destroy everything Jim Kirk worked for?"

"Doctor, I *knew* Captain Kirk was going into danger. Such foreknowledge, however, was without logical foundation. So I said nothing. Did nothing. And he died. By my failure to act, I killed him. I killed him as surely as if I had turned a phaser on him. It is not logical to accept promotion - reward, if you like - when I am responsible for the death of my predecessor"

"Spock, you're not thinking straight. Do you mean to tell me you've never felt... say, worry - before, when Jim was walking into something unknown? And nothing happened? This was the same. I was worried about him, too - but you can't call that foreknowledge."

"Doctor, this was not... worry. I *knew*. You cannot change my mind, Doctor; I have made my final decision. I am resigning. By permitting him to walk into danger unwarned, I killed Captain Kirk. I find I am not prepared to kill other men by ordering them into danger - something a Captain must be prepared to do. That would be an even worse crime than the sin of omission of which I am guilty."

"Spock, are you saying you think Jim was a killer because he sometimes had to order men to their deaths?"

"No, Doctor. I am saying that for a Vulcan, such an action is... unthinkable. There is nothing more to discuss."

But if Spock thought there was nothing to discuss, McCoy clearly didn't. He tried to re-open the subject many times, but eventually he had to give up when Spock flatly refused to respond. And in the end, Spock managed to slip away away without even saying goodbye. When the Enterprise reached the Starbase, Spock left Scott in command while he beamed down to see the station commander - and he did not return. Someone went for his kit, which he had left prepacked - and no-one on the Enterprise saw him again.

Spock found it difficult to persuade the Starbase commander to allow him to spend the period before his resignation came into effect in seclusion. Eventually he stated that he was over-tired,

had realised that he was not suited for command, and that he required a period of solitary meditation to allow him to recover from the strain of being in command.

But although he was in seclusion, his mind gave him no rest, no peace. He had caused Kirk's death... and it seemed that Kirk's ghost thought so too, for it gave him no peace either. He could hear Kirk's voice now - waking and sleeping, it filled his ears. It was impossible to make out what his Captain was saying, but the voice itself was clear. And he had never believed in ghosts...

His kit was brought to him. He sent it on to Vulcan, retaining nothing but the one suit of civilian clothes that he would soon need.

At last the waiting period was over. The Enterprise was gone now, with a new Captain and First Officer... Momentarily, as he thought of her, he wished his friends well.

He emerged, a pale shadow of his former self, showing the strain of the weeks of seclusion when he had refused food and had frequently gone without sleep in a vain attempt to quieten the voice that spoke on and on, unintelligibly. And he had found that when he woke from sleep with that voice in his ears, his first instinct had been to turn and look for Kirk... and the moments of realisation were almost unbearable.

This Starbase was a stopping-off place for space liners bound for the further reaches of Federation-influenced space, their last chance to replenish their stores. By chance - a chance for which he was grateful - the first of these liners to stop was a vessel run by a planet situated right at the edge of 'civilised' space; a planet that had trade links with other worlds beyond the Federation's sphere of influence. Spock took a passage on it; he would be able to lose himself in territory where Federation Starships never went... and then, perhaps, away from everything that could recall memories, he might... forget?

No-one asked him any questions. The members of the crew were not particularly interested in the passengers, nor the passengers in each other. No-one paid any attention to the anonymous Vulcan in slightly outmoded native dress who came aboard. No-one was interested in whether or not he ate or slept. No-one cared.

He disembarked, a shabby figure in once-expensive clothes that now hung loosely on a skeletal frame, and who looked at least twice his proper age. Lines of care etched deep into his face - lines that deepened every day as the voice from his recent past continued speaking to him.

At the perfunctory Customs clearance, he gave his name as Stane; stated that he was merely passing through, and was given permission to stay for not more than six months on a restricted work permit - since he claimed to have no skills. The restriction meant that the only jobs available to him were menial.

He found work at the space port, where he was employed as a sweeper, vainly endeavouring to keep reasonably clean the landing area that appeared to have been built at the centre of an eddy of the ubiquitous wind that permanently swept the planet. No matter how much wind-blown rubbish he cleared, within an hour it was as bad

as ever. His conscientious nature would not permit him to skimp the job, although no-one would have noticed it if he had.

He stayed there for less than a month. The opportunity to move arose when a ship from beyond Federation space called in; and he took it.

It was in a vain attempt to shut out the persistent voice in his ears that the Vulcan Stane mixed with the other passengers on this new ship. He quickly came to be regarded as an eccentric, and speculation was rife as to whether this eccentricity was personal or racial; he would often, in the middle of a conversation, seem to lose track of what was being said, dropping into a private world of his own, recalling himself if addressed directly to make some comment on whatever matter was under discussion when he 'switched off'. The passengers began to regard him as something of a buffoon, useful to enliven the monotony of the trip; several of them became quite expert at noticing when he had gone into a reverie, and steering the conversation to a point where, whatever remark he made, it would sound incongruous. He knew he was being mocked, and it hurt even although his pride would not let him show it. But the alternative - to remain in his cabin haunted by Kirk's voice - was so much more unbearable that he tolerated it.

At last they made planetfall.

This world offered even less in the way of a cultured civilisation than the one he had just left, being at the least attractive level of an industrial era - advanced enough for spaceflight, not advanced enough to regard machines as servants to ease the daily toil. Smoke poured densely from factory chimneys, so thick that on the sunniest days the sky was still hidden by a pall of smoke and the light could not force its way through. Waterways were open sewers in which no life could exist. Bureaucracy proliferated; he had to sign many papers in triplicate, quadruplicate and quintuplicate before he was permitted to land, and then he could remain for only as long as it took him to board another ship.

He left the polluted world with relief, on a ship taking him even further from Federation dominated space. He moved from planet to planet, always going further and further into the unknown, always hoping that if he went far enough he would escape from the voice inside his head... the loved voice that so tormented him by its continual presence. Some of the planets he visited were cultured, with a welcome - of sorts - for aliens, though nowhere did he find the racial tolerance that existed within the Federation. Other worlds were backward, some of them exploited by more advanced races. A few had highly sophisticated technologies, but even there planetary chauvinism existed and he found himself, if not spurned as undesirable, at best regarded as inferior. Where he was permitted to work, he did so for a little while, then left before his host world decided that he had overstayed his welcome. The alien Stane, who had no planet, moved from world to world, a space gypsy. His clothes became a peculiar mixture of bits and pieces that he had picked up as his own wore out; trousers from one world, a jacket from another...

At last he took passage on a tramp vessel, working his way. He arranged to leave the ship at its furthest port of call; and so he came to Phalin.

He would have left again - the captain of the tramp would have accepted him back aboard - but by the time he had discovered what the planet was like - a matter of hours - his ship, and his last chance of leaving, was gone. And as soon as he had to spend a night there, he fell foul of Phalin laws.

Aliens were inferior; inferior even to the packs of half-wild canines that roamed the streets, neglected, starved, but encouraged by the authorities as a means of keeping people off the streets at night. Aliens had to pay, and pay dearly, for the privilege of a hole to sleep in to shelter them from the dogs, a damp heap of sacking to use as a bed, and a daily bowl of scraps from a 'food kitchen' - scraps that were regarded as unfit for Phalin consumption, being stale at best and rotten at worst. And like all the other aliens condemned to live in this hell-hole, the alien Stane was forced to work from dawn to dusk without a break at a mixture of menial jobs, and with no meals other than the one bowl of rotting scraps. He found sweeping the streets the least unpleasant of his jobs, for there at least he was out of doors, away from the nauseating stench that made most of the aliens' jobs so unpleasant. Their only companions, apart from the other aliens of several races, were the petty criminals, inept enough to have been caught, who were also condemned to this life - and even those criminals were prone to the racial bigotry that denied all aliens the dignity of being intelligent beings. They were, in truth, paid a pittance for their work - but nearly all their 'pay' was taken back in taxation to pay for their 'food' and 'lodging'.

The alien who had money could leave - once he paid the planetary authorities the excessive embarkation dues they charged. But Stane no longer had financial resources. His only hope of ever leaving was to save every penny that he was left with after the taxman had finished decimating his 'pay'. He estimated that it would take him ten years - if he lived that long.

He felt no bitterness towards the planetary authorities - they were the outcome of their training, their background, their culture; but he felt plenty of bitterness towards his erstwhile crewmates, who, knowing that he intended leaving the ship, had neglected to warn him. Perhaps it was the captain's revenge over him for choosing to leave...

Already undernourished, his strength was being further sapped by the poor and inadequate food that was his ration. He could, indeed, have spent some of the pittance that was left to him on augmenting his rations; most of his fellows in suffering did so. There were one or two shops in the slum area where the aliens were lodged that would serve them - at double the cost of the item to any Phalin. But if he did that, he would never be able to leave.

And his torment was further increased by the voice that still sounded in his ears despite all his mental attempts to block it; still speaking words that he could not understand...

He sat in the food kitchen one night, lingering over the unappetising and ill-nourishing and wholly inadequate bowl of scraps because this place was at least warm. He had long since abandoned vegetarianism; to adhere to it would have meant death by quick starvation, for absolutely no attention was paid here to dietary preferences - the scraps came according to what was available. He was being slowly starved to death now, but that death would not come

for a number of years - and he was stubbornly determined to survive what he knew was a deliberate form of genocide, determined to prove to this bigoted planet that one alien, at least, could survive this treatment - not many of the aliens presently in the food kitchen had been there since before his arrival, although one or two who had preceded him to Phalin still clung grimly on to life. Most were more recent arrivals, and Stane found himself wondering why it was that aliens still arrived. Surely the planet was known to be chauvinistic to the point of paranoia? As for the handful of natives who shared their suffering... Stane wondered briefly just what their crimes had been, to be condemned to this life, but he lacked the energy to inquire - and anyway, even if he did, his lack of knowledge of the language, coupled to the natives' bigotry, would effectively prevent his getting a comprehensible answer. All his energy was devoted to trying to block out the insidious, familiar voice from which he had no escape. Even now, after nearly three years, the pain of that loss was as fresh as ever... even now, he still woke from uneasy slumber to look around for Kirk. Not even his present exhaustion could banish the ghost of his dead Captain...

The door of the food kitchen crashed open. Armed law-enforcers swarmed in, their weapons ready. All the occupants were forced out at gunpoint and into huge trucks where they were herded together like the cattle they were considered to be. After a short trip they were forced out and into a cramped room.

The alien Stane was not quite sure what all this was about, and in his uncertainty he had many companions. Denied all rights, the aliens had been unable even to learn the language - other than 'Do that!'. There were shouted questions that they did not understand but that seemed to be connected with being where they had no right to be, questions that were shouted louder and louder as if sheer volume could lead to understanding - and at last all were herded back into the trucks again.

There was a long, jolting, uncomfortable journey in the darkened, airless trucks, during which time they were given no food or water and during which they could not even sit down, packed close together as they were. Stane found the close physical proximity of so many strangers the most wearing part of the whole trip; he had become accustomed to inadequate food, he had never needed much water and he frequently went without sleep - but in the physical contact, especially of one anonymous hand that had early in the trip clutched his and refused to let go, he felt anxiety and fear - fear of the future.

When at last the vehicle stopped, they were forced out, blinking in the brilliant sunshine and stumbling on stiffened legs - those of them who still lived. At least a quarter of their number dropped as the pressure holding them up eased; and most of them were dead. Only one or two revived to join their fellows. As he went, Stane wrenched his hand from the unexpectedly strong grip that had sought to retain it, but when he had recovered the use of his eyes and looked round, he could see no-one that it could have been. Instead, he saw the steep, vertical walls of a quarry.

They were hustled into a long shed. It was a sort of washroom. By gestures, it was made clear to them that they were to strip. They were forced through a bath of icy cold, evil-smelling liquid that they could only guess was a disinfectant - though most of them, compelled through no choice of their own to live in squalor, needed no forcing to wash. And certainly, after this bath, Stane stopped being bothered by the lice that had plagued him for

altogether too long, despite all his attempts to keep free of them. Then they were given clothes, rough and ill-fitting but at least clean. Finally, they were fed. The meal was still hopelessly inadequate as far as quantity went, but at least the food was fresh and nourishing.

Then they were taken to another long shed. The floor was thick with straw, obviously intended as bedding, but at least, like the clothes, it was dry and fresh. There, they were locked in.

Next day, they discovered - those who had not guessed - why they were there. It was indeed a quarry, and they were set to work there, as slaves. But although the work was hard and the hours still from dawn to dusk, and their hands first torn and then calloused by the rough stone, at least they were kept relatively clean by an enforced wash (welcome to most of them) and disinfection every tenth day, given clean clothes and straw on the same day, and given better food than had previously been their lot. Stane wondered why; a momentary curiosity that surprised himself. Then he realised that, as work animals, they did have some value - minimal, perhaps, but some. For if mostly aliens were forced into this work, the supply was not unlimited. It did seem, however, that he had lost what little chance he had ever had of leaving this world.

Although weakened by poor and insufficient food over many months, Stane was still much stronger than many of his fellow workers. It was that strength that enabled him, on the twenty-third day of this new purgatory, to support a falling rock for long enough to enable one of his fellow sufferers who was in its path to scramble clear, though he did it at the cost of a torn and bleeding hand.

Bec - the man he had saved - was one of the handful of natives who had been rounded up with him and the other aliens. Rather to Stane's surprise, for these slum natives had appeared to be fully as bigoted as the overseers, Bec then cultivated him - Stane later suspected, cynically, that the man had, even then, seen a use for his strength. But for the moment he accepted that in the native he had found a friend of sorts. It was Bec who taught him the language of Phalin; Bec who, when his understanding of the language had progressed sufficiently, told him why they were there.

There had been a robbery in the town on the day of their arrest; and the aliens, naturally, were immediately suspected. Since the thief had remained undiscovered, they were all sentenced to labour - for life - in the quarry, as suspected criminals. The slum natives were included as their punishment for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"But - " Bec said - "for one or two daring men, escape is possible. I have friends in the city who would hide us. Your strength and my knowledge, Stane - how about it?"

Escape from here; it might eventually lead to escape from Phalin. Stane agreed.

Bec arranged for them to work together. Stane never discovered how Bec managed it. He also arranged for them to work near the perimeter and storage areas, a region where few workers were allowed and those only the ones considered least likely to try to get away, the broken-spirited ones. Somehow, Bec must have persuaded the quarry overseers that neither wanted to escape; and indeed, as the overseers well knew, it was in many ways an easier life than they

had known previously. If they were surprised at a native's friendship with one of the inferior aliens, they did not voice it - it was always possible that they knew that this alien had saved Bec's life.

They were well supervised at first, but then, as they learned the skills necessary to this area, the obvious supervision ceased as the supervisors were lulled into believing them content. They continued working hard, however; Stane because it was his nature to do so, Bec because he was afraid - presumably - of losing his chance of escape.

They worked in the perimeter area for four months before a chance of escape offered itself.

A truck that was being loaded was inadequately guarded; they slipped aboard it and were driven away by the unsuspecting driver. At the first stop, several hours later, they peered out of the back, saw that they were unobserved, and climbed out. It was a long walk back to the town, but walking would be safer than risking being found if the truck was searched; they had little doubt that their disappearance had been noted by now.

It took them nearly a week to walk to the town; and every step of the way Stane was haunted by the voice, talking on and on, speaking words that he could... nearly ... understand. Occasionally, one even made sense. But the sense added to his torment, for the words spoke of the past - of companionship and a contentment that he knew was gone for ever.

Bec indeed knew of a hiding place; and the alien Stane found himself mixing with the real dregs of Phalin society, men who would cut their own mothers' throats for a minimal payment, who barely knew the meaning of the word 'loyalty'. Barely. But some understanding of the word must exist, Stane realised, or Bec would have been betrayed to the authorities as soon as they appeared. He did not try to fool himself that he was owed anything - Bec must have some influence here.

And Stane himself? Since he had already been punished for something he had not done - and lost his savings at the same time - he reasoned that Phalin society owed him something. He joined Bec in his petty crimes, acting as lookout, helping when strength was needed, occasionally slipping out on his own to attack passing victims, usually in the half light of dusk and dawn when the dogs were not quite so active. He selected his victims carefully. Ordinary citizens he allowed to pass unmolested, little knowing the danger they had been in; but anyone in authority was subject to a quick attack from behind, the only thing of which they were conscious, a firm hand gripping a shoulder, then knowing no more until they woke to find themselves poorer by whatever amount of money they had been carrying. Stane began to feel happier. He had almost enough money now for the embarkation fee. If only the voice would give him peace! It kept calling him by the name he was trying to forget. He was no longer Spock. He was Stane - stained by his own actions.

This victim was walking confidently. Stane readied himself; but his intended prey must have heard something, and swung round. A hand holding a knife came up. In self-defence, Stane struck - a killing blow. The man fell dead.

Stane turned to run - and stopped. Behind him were two law-enforcers.

The trial was a farce - although Stane was forced to admit to himself that the verdict was fair. He had killed. He was condemned to work as an engineering labourer in the lower deck of one of Phalin's spacecraft. It seemed a strange punishment... until he started the minimal training that was to ready him for the job.

These craft were atomic powered.

Although the Phalin knew that there were other, better, types of propulsion, they were so bigoted that they preferred to continue using these outmoded ships of their own design. And the radiation levels of the lower decks were such that only condemned criminals were set to work there, for life expectancy on those decks was very short. Most trips were of limited duration; Stane could expect to live through six or seven of them - though by the time he had completed one, he would be a dead man.

The ship took off. Stane was resigned to his fate now. And in death, at least the voice would be stilled. A ghost couldn't haunt a dead man - could it?

Two days out, the ship began to toss erratically. The labourers, with no-one to tell them what was happening, were mostly terrified; Stane could think of several things that could cause this; an ion storm, perhaps. It was unlikely to be engine trouble - down here, they would know about it if it were. Then one sharp jolt told him. The ship was under attack. Even as the fact registered he realised, with something of a shock, that the voice had stopped - had even it deserted him? Pieces flew off a machine under the force of the external impact, and a needle-sharp sliver pierced Stane's arm. Then another sharp blow hit the ship, and he was sent flying.

When he regained consciousness, it was to find himself, along with his fellow labourers, guarded by two strangers. They were rough-looking men; one had a bad scar on his face. Stane lay silently watching them, wondering what had happened.

He found out soon enough. Another stranger entered; a huge man, fully seven feet tall, who dwarfed everyone around. He looked over the prisoners critically. At last he said, "I know the Phalin way. You are all condemned criminals. I don't know or care what crimes brought you here - all that concerns me is that you are already condemned to die.

"Now - I have an offer to make to you. You may have realised; we are what are generally termed pirates. We need men. I offer you this choice - join us. Or remain here to die."

There was no real choice. All the labourers, Stane included, even those who knew they were already dying, joined the pirates.

As he waited his turn to be taken aboard the pirate vessel, Stane admired the sleek lines of her through a port. Her name - Lynx - was painted proudly along her nose.

Once aboard, the new hands were taken to a fairly large cabin and left there with the assortment of pirates already in it. These pirates were gathered in groups, talking; but when the 'officer' who

took the newcomers in had gone, they collected round.

One of the new recruits was a small, weedy-looking individual who was, as Stane already knew, an arrant coward. How he had ever summoned up enough courage to commit a crime in the first place was beyond Stane's understanding. One of the pirates noticed him.

"Well, mates, look what we've got here," he growled. He pushed the little coward roughly towards the other pirates. The man cringed in fear. It was no help to him. He was pushed roughly about from one to another of the pirates of the established crew; his pleas for mercy fell on deaf ears, until at last he was too out of breath even to plead. At last, one of the pirates, tiring of the game, hit him hard enough to fell him, and they turned back to the other recruits.

They picked on another. This one was tougher, with the courage of a cornered weasel. He fought back, unskillfully; rather to Stane's surprise, he was granted fair play, with only one of the pirates opposing him. It was only a question of time before he was knocked down, and lay too stunned to rise. The pirates looked for a third victim to play with.

By now, Stane had grasped something of the rules of this fierce, lawless society. It was clearly a question of kick or be kicked. The hapless little coward was fair game for all, right at the bottom of the pecking order. The second one still had his place to find, but a rough estimate would have been formed already. Everyone above the man who had beaten him would be above him, but he would still have to fight the others to find his exact place. It would come when he won, but it would be subject to change. Life near the bottom of the pecking order here would in all probability be as bad, worse, than life on Phalin. Therefore, he had to be near the top, Stane decided. He would not wait for those brutal men to decide to test him. He would choose when he would fight - and the time was... Now!

With a shouted Vulcan warcry remembered from history lessons, he leaped forward into the crowd of pirates. Three went flying before they realised what had hit them. He flung another over one shoulder into the faces of two others, whirling to face in yet another direction as he did so. He grappled hand to hand with a huge, brawny pirate and beat him to his knees by brute strength.

It was all over in less than a minute. The pirates crowded round him, patting his back, and he allowed the familiarity, realising that he must. The only one who held at all aloof was the brawny one he had just defeated - and he guessed that that was because he had just been beaten into second place.

Stane, his position assured, stood back and watched the pirates hazing the rest of the new men. Only one of them gained anything by his example, and attacked of his own accord. It gained him a lot, placing him third in status. But the very fact that he had the courage to attack meant that he also had to be out of the ordinary, anyway.

The battles for precedence fought, the newcomers were directed to their places in the cabin. Each level of fighting ability had its place. Stane and the other good fighter, a man called Leon, went with the brawny one and one other to beside where a radiator gave off heat; two chairs stood beside it. Someone kicked the little coward to where several chairs were stacked. It was made

clear to him that he was to take two chairs to his betters. His status was fixed - the servant of all the others. Stane suspected that the kicker was the previous servant, promoted by the simple fact of their having found someone even more subservient than he. But in that one's place, Stane thought, he would not be too eager to kick hard; the worm might turn, one day, and the one he would take on first would surely be the one next above him.

Stane himself had no worries. He settled down beside the radiator, the man called Leon at his side, facing the other two men.

Life here was easy, Stane discovered. Food was plentiful and nourishing, if monotonous. They raided when they could waylay a ship, cruised steadily at other times. Each man had his duties, but a crewman in Stane's position could easily force his underlings to do extra duty if he wanted to. Usually they did not - life could get too boring, they had found, as his new companions were honest enough to point out. Stane nodded understandingly. He had travelled enough as a passenger in the last four years to have learned that, for a passenger, a space trip mostly consisted of boredom.

The officers, such as they were, rarely came near them, and made no attempt to discipline the men, who had their own code, their own laws. The only general rule was that they obeyed the officers during raids and on such shipboard duties as fell to them.

Stane quickly found that his three companions were more intelligent than he had at first assumed they would be. Their conversations around the radiator were at times surprisingly deep, and he found himself having to watch his tongue. Not that mention of the Federation, or of Starfleet, would matter; they were too far from Federation space ever to enter it. But he wanted to continue as a man with no past.

The voice, which had fallen silent during the attack so that he had dared to think he was at last free of it, had come back, too. And now he could understand it, all that it said. It spoke of days past, of friendship, of dangers braved and overcome... His companions began to recognise that Stane sometimes had odd periods of abstraction, but none of them dared to ask him about them.

The door was flung open; an officer stood there. The brawny Russ was first on his feet; Stane, realising that something was happening, close behind him, followed by their two companions. The others, slower to react, came to their feet one by one. The little servant shrank into a corner, hoping to remain unseen.

"Raid?" Russ asked harshly.

A stabbing finger pointed. The officer clearly knew the men's customs, for he picked first the four men of the elite group, then the members of the second group, leaving the dregs of the third group out. There was a concerted rush to the door by the selected men.

The attacked vessel was a freighter, but a freighter with some teeth. Her crew was unwilling to give up without a fight, and being without hope of escaping with their lives, they fought desperately.

Physically they resembled Klingons. Stane had no idea whether they resembled Klingons mentally as well as physically - he simply fought, and fought well, all of his warrior ancestry, mixed with his Human will to win, to the fore. Soon the remnants of the defenders were prisoners, not entirely without loss to the pirate crew; Stane saw at least one officer go down as well as three of four of the men.

The rest of the crew of the pirate ship was now hustled up, to shift the cargo into the hold of their own ship, the prisoners being forced to help as well. Then, rather to Stane's surprise, the prisoners were left in their own ship, which was turned loose. Stane commented on this to Russ.

"Better to do that," the brawny man replied. "That way, they recruit replacements for the ones who died, they're on their way with a new cargo inside a few weeks. Destroy the ship - it'd take months to build a new one. We destroy the radio equipment, of course - can't have them calling for help - but we leave the ship able to travel. And when the ship carries slave labour - like the one you were on - we recruit."

Stane nodded. "Practical," he said,

An officer came up to them. "You," he said to Stane. "Come."

Stane looked at him for a moment, wondering why, and obeyed. He was taken to the Captain - the giant who had recruited them in the first place. The man studied him for a moment. Then -

"I hear you're top dog in the crew," the Captain said.

Stane grunted. "It seemed the best place to be."

The Captain chuckled. "You learn quick. And you're a good fighter, or you wouldn't have beaten Russ. We noticed that today, too." He was silent for a moment. "We had casualties today - we lost the officer in charge of the boarding parties. How would you like the job?"

Short and to the point, Stane thought. Well, why not? If they always let the survivors go free... The quicker the raided ship is captured, the more survivors there will be...

"Yes," he said firmly. "But -"

"Well?" There was an unfriendly growl in the Captain's voice.

"I'd like to have a picked group of the crew to work directly under me - men I'd trained to fight my way."

The Captain shook his head. "It won't work, Stane," he said. "We tried that once - I thought it would be a good idea. But the men won't do it. There's a limit to how much we can force them to do. They'll fight for their place in the crew; they'll fight for plunder. But they won't train."

"If I can persuade them, you won't object?"

"No. I won't object - just as long as you remember I'm the Captain of this vessel. And I mean to stay Captain."

Stane got his group of picked fighters. He started off by getting his three elite companions to join him, making it clear to them that they would be his immediate subordinates, with definite, as well as pecking order, authority over the crew. Then he gave them a crash course in Federation unarmed combat, reserving only one or two tricks in case Russ should get ideas and try to take him on again despite his officer status - for that was one of the ways in which an ambitious crewmen could rise to be an officer, to fight and defeat one of the established officers. They in turn instructed the others - also reserving one or two tricks, for the same reason. Stane guessed that they knew he had done that too. Only the two or three at the very bottom of the pecking order received no instruction; they were incapable of learning any form of combat except the knife in the back.

It was immediately clear that Stane's ideas were useful, for the next ship they raided was captured in half the usual time with very few casualties. And so it went on. Ship after ship was captured and left empty of cargo. They landed their stolen goods when the holds were full and the proceeds were divided between the men according to their place on the ship. They had no set base; when they made planetfall, they were free to spend their money as they pleased, if they pleased. Before they left the ship, they were told when it would be leaving again. If they were not on board, they were abandoned. On many worlds, this meant a fate worse than death, for a man drunk enough to miss lift-off had probably spent all his money and was left destitute; and Stane was learning that Phalin was far from being the only such bigoted world. He had simply not noticed it too much for a great part of his wanderings, since he had had money; a commodity that opens many doors, even on the most bigoted world.

They made their way onward, Stane neither knowing nor caring in what direction they were going.

At last they raided a ship whose occupants had a strange familiarity. He had seen beings like these once... somewhere... but the memory was elusive, drowned out by the voice he had still not learned to ignore in spite of all his efforts.

Four days later, they were attacked. Attacked! It was the first time that such a thing had happened in the memory of the oldest, longest-serving man aboard. Stane gathered his fighting elite - now swollen to six men including himself - and faced the enemy.

Red shirts. They were wearing red shirts. Behind the red shirts was a yellow one; behind that again, a blue one. *These were Federation personnel!*

He should have given the order to attack; he hesitated. And then, even as he began to run forward at the men, he was felled by something hitting his head.

He regained consciousness to realise that he was lying in a comfortable bed. He opened his eyes. He was in a Starship Sickbay. But that was... illogical. A pirate would not be given such treatment... The voice sounded beside him.

"Spock."

The turn of his head was automatic, as he had turned it on waking so often in the past years. He froze. For the first time, his hallucination had form. His dead friend was there...

"You're dead," he said clearly. "Can't you leave me in peace?"

"You're dreaming, Spock - "

"I know I am. You have been dead for five years." Deliberately, he closed his eyes again; he slipped back into unconsciousness.

Kirk looked up at McCoy hopelessly. McCoy, who had been standing at his desk where Spock had failed to see him, came forward, his eyes fixed on the diagnostic panel.

"You did reach him, Jim. Keep trying. It's all we can do."

When Stane regained consciousness again, it was to find himself in the brig with the rest of his elite force. It was almost a relief to find himself there; at least this was a situation he could cope with. And they stayed in the brig until the Starship reached a Starbase. There was a quick trial; the verdict was a foregone conclusion. He was readily identified by a survivor of the raided vessel. No wonder the people aboard seemed familiar - they were Federation citizens... he thought.

He was found guilty; sentenced to death.

McCoy studied the diagnostic readings unhappily. Kirk looked at his face and broke off his steady monologue.

"Is it bad, Bones?"

McCoy swallowed, and nodded. "Life functions are failing, Jim. I don't know why. There wasn't any physical damage, only the head injury... Only," he added bitterly. "Maybe that's what's wrong. Maybe it damaged the bit of his brain that helps control body functions. I just don't know. There's nothing in the records, anywhere, about a Vulcan being unconscious this long."

"There must be brain activity - all that delirious muttering - "

"And what he said when he did come round. He's sure you're dead."

"But he did come round. He knows now that I'm alive. That's what I don't understand."

"No. He didn't accept that you were alive. You have to reach him again, Jim. You have to. Or he will die."

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The condemned prisoners were kept in solitary confinement, probably to preclude escape plans. Escape? Where could he escape to, from a Starbase? He was to die, he didn't know when or how. And that was only right. He had killed. Unintentionally, perhaps... but by his failure to act, all those years ago, he had killed...

The voice was in his ears again, trying to tell him it was alive. He shook his head, trying to shut his mind to the steady, convincing tones, hoarse now but still persistent.

There were voices outside the cell 'door'; the forcefield was shut off; a man in command yellow entered, and crossed to the bed where he lay.

Kirk.

He closed his eyes to shut out the hallucination.

"Spock. Wake up, Spock. Look at me."

No, he whispered silently to himself. No. You can't make me. You're not real. I'm only dreaming you're here.

"Spock." The voice choked on a sob. With something of surprise, he opened his eyes and looked round. He was no longer in his cell, but back in a Sickbay bed. And Kirk sat at his side... his face wet with the tears that trickled silently down his face. Kirk reached out and took his hand gently.

"Spock."

"Can hallucinations cry?" he asked, puzzled.

"I'm not a hallucination, Spock. I'm real. You can feel my hand touching yours, can't you? I'm really here."

"Jim... ?"

"Yes, Spock. I'm here. I wouldn't lie to you."

Spock seemed almost to smile... then his eyes closed again.

McCoy came out of his office, attracted by the conversation. Kirk looked at him.

"It looks more hopeful now, Jim."

"He's unconscious again."

"Yes, but it's not so long since his last period of consciousness. And I think he realises now that you're alive... the readings are looking much better."

The door slid open. Scott entered, accompanied by a tall Vulcan who looked familiar although Kirk couldn't place him for a moment or two. Then he recognised him, and wondered at his own obtuseness.

"Ambassador Sarek!"

"Captain." Sarek showed no surprise at the sight of a Starship captain holding his son's hand; it might have been the most natural sight in the universe.

"What brings you here, sir?"

"Spock. Your message about his injury was relayed to me by my wife; I was in the vicinity, travelling in a small courier vessel on my way back to Vulcan from a mission. I instructed my pilot to divert in order to rendezvous with the Enterprise, and here I am. What exactly is wrong with Spock?"

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other.

"We were investigating Alpha Lyncis III for topaline deposits," Kirk explained. "There was fairly heavy volcanic activity. The first landing party, of which I was a member, was knocked out by a concentration of gas. Fortunately it seems to have dissipated fairly quickly, otherwise I probably wouldn't be here to tell the tale. But its effects lasted for several hours. Spock led a search party looking for us, and he was hit on the head by a stone dislodged by a subsequent tremor. He's been in a coma since... nearly a week, now."

"There's still no quick treatment for a coma." McCoy took up the tale. "The only treatment we know is the one that's been used for centuries now; someone close to the patient talks to him, non-stop, trying to break through to his consciousness. Jim's been doing that all week, almost without sleep apart from a couple of hours yesterday when I had to lance a concentration of poison in Spock's arm - he tore his hand open on a rock deflecting it from a crewman, and the cut became infected."

"From one or two things he's said, in delirium and when he came round for a couple of minutes, he thinks I'm dead, and blames himself," Kirk went on. "Certainly, just about the last thing he saw must have been the original landing party lying there. Though we think I persuaded him that I'm alive, a little while ago."

"Can you do anything, Ambassador?" McCoy asked bluntly. "There's so little I can do..."

Sarek nodded. "I can try," he said quietly. He moved close to Spock's bedside, placed his hands firmly on Spock's temples. His face went rigid with concentration. There was a long silence, during which the Humans hardly dared even breathe. Then Sarek raised his head and moved away from the bed.

"There is no need for me to do anything," he said quietly. "He is no longer unwilling to recover, Captain. You convinced him of your reality. He has initiated a healing trance."

"Unwilling?" Kirk asked curiously.

"During his coma, Spock has been ruled by his Human emotions. His thought processes have been illogical. But he is well on the way to recovery now." He turned to Scott, who had been a silent observer of all this. "I should return to my own ship now. Mr. Scott, if you would be so good..."

"Aren't you going to stay until he recovers, sir?" McCoy asked.

"There is no time. I must return to Vulcan quickly with my

report. I could only spare an hour at most. But I am confident that he is in good hands."

"You understand why I don't accompany you to the transporter, sir?" Kirk said.

"Yes, Captain." He made for the door, and followed Scott out.

"Call me if there's any drastic change," McCoy said. He went back into his office, leaving Kirk watching Spock's relaxed face.

At last Spock began to toss, trying to waken himself. Kirk obligingly slapped him hard, and again. His hand came up and caught Kirk's wrist. Then he turned his head to look at Kirk.

"I was dreaming, Jim?" he said.

Kirk nodded. "You were only dreaming, Spock. It's you who nearly died." He blinked, suddenly aware of how sleepy he was, and gave a huge yawn.

McCoy came over from his office, and took Kirk's arm. "Bed for you, Jim," he said. "Over here..."

He turned from settling Kirk to find Spock already sitting up. "And where do you think you're going?" he asked.

"I am fully recovered, Doctor. I will be able to return to duty."

"Oh no you won't."

"Doctor, I assure you - "

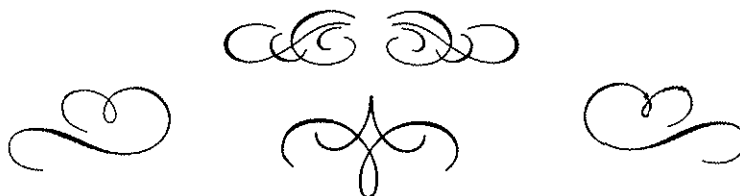
"Spock, healing trance or no healing trance, you were out cold for a week. I'd be failing in my duty if I let you go back to work just as soon as you regain consciousness. I want you to stay put - at least until you've had a proper sleep. After that... we'll see."

"Doctor..." His voice trailed off as McCoy continued to watch him implacably. He lay back obediently, and closed his eyes.

McCoy waited until he was sure that Spock was, in fact, asleep, not merely feigning slumber. Then he turned and went back into his office.

While the two most restless patients he even had were asleep, he could relax.

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THE TEST

by

Sheila Clark

Kirk relaxed; the automatic, unconscious relaxation of a tension so habitual that he was wholly unaware of its existence. While the ship was in orbit around a Federation planet - albeit a very recent member planet - nothing unexpected was likely to happen. They had arrived four days earlier than scheduled; for four days he could put to the back of his mind his ever-present concern for the welfare of his ship and his crew.

He glanced back at the communications station. "Contact the planet, Uhura," he ordered. "Report our arrival and request permission for shore leave facilities for the crew."

"Aye, sir."

It was, however, some minutes before there was any response. Kirk was beginning to think that some catastrophe had overtaken the entire planet before Uhura looked round.

"One of the Drennan ruling council is acknowledging, Captain."

"On the viewscreen, Lieutenant."

Two people appeared on the screen, a man and a woman. It was she who spoke. "You are early, Captain Kirk. We did not expect you for some days."

There seemed to be a degree of constraint in her voice. Strange.

"My apologies if our early arrival is inconvenient to you," Kirk said slowly.

"It is merely... a little embarrassing that our Council Head is currently unavailable. We - " the speaker indicated her companion - "do not have the authority to grant shore leave facilities for your crew at present."

"I see." The woman was not a good liar. What she was saying might be the truth - but it was not the whole truth. She was concealing something. But if he let her think he was fooled... "Don't worry about it, it isn't vital. Would you ask your Council Head to contact me as soon as possible?"

"Of course, Captain." Was that a note of relief in her voice?

"Are you in contact with Ensign Bronna?" Kirk went on. Although his new crewman still had four days of his embarkation leave to enjoy, Kirk wanted to say 'Hello', at least.

"I regret... Ensign Bronna is also unavailable. Since he does not become a member of your crew for another four days, he is... out of contact with us. They will both get in touch with you... three days from now. It is unlikely to be possible before that." The

voice was quietly apologetic, but firm.

Mentally, Kirk shrugged, surer than ever that the woman was covering up something, but what she said was true. Their new ensign was still on leave and not expecting them; and the Council Head was certain to have engagements for this period. He couldn't insist on seeing either of them.

"Very well," he said resignedly. "I'll expect to hear from them both in three days. Kirk out."

However, much to Kirk's surprise, the Council Head made contact little more than an hour later. Kirk, expecting the man to be elderly, was startled to find that he was young - he looked to be little more than twenty.

"I am Fordda, Council Head of Dren," he said quietly. "You are welcome here, Captain Kirk."

"Thank you, sir."

"I would be honoured if you would beam down to visit me. There is a small matter that I wish to discuss with you."

"Certainly, sir. Whenever you say."

"What better time than the present? Also... I believe that your second in command is a Vulcan?"

"Commander Spock. Yes."

"He will also be most welcome."

Kirk glanced over to the library computer, his lips twitching involuntarily at the sight of Spock's raised eyebrow. "We'll be right down, sir. Kirk out."

They were greeted by Fordda and another man who stood inconspicuously in the background until Fordda invited them to be seated and then came forward to offer them drinks. When Spock hesitated, the man murmured, "Our drinks are not alcoholic, Mr. Spock."

As they sipped the honey sweet drink, Kirk said, "I understand that Ensign Bronna is currently unavailable, sir?"

"I am afraid that is correct, Captain. Indeed, it is about that that I wished to see you," Fordda admitted. "Ensign Bronna wishes - naturally - to undertake his test of manhood before he leaves Dren again. He chose not to take it before he went to Starfleet Academy, but this time he does not know when - if ever - he will return. The test begins in three hours, and takes two days. Until it is over, it would be against custom for him to be disturbed in his mental preparations. Indeed, to disturb those preparations might cause his death during the course of the test."

"So far, none other of our people have chosen to join your Starfleet. When Bronna reports back to us his judgement of your strength and moral character, we will have more facts on which to judge whether or not we are betraying our beliefs by doing so. I am not speaking personally, Captain, you realise... ?"

"Yes, sir," Kirk replied quietly. He had already been warned that the Drennans considered themselves superior to most other races.

"However, I feel that Bronna has the right to know that his senior officers also are men, and since you have arrived early... To succeed in this test, without prior mental preparation, you would indeed prove to my people that Starfleet chooses its senior officers carefully and well. I ask you both to undertake our test of manhood."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other. It was phrased as a request... but both knew that for practical purposes, it was an order. They had no alternative but to agree - or leave the Drennans believing that Starfleet's senior officers were weaklings.

They stood with the other aspirants to 'manhood' - in all, eighteen men and, strangely, five girls. All twenty three were dressed alike, in grey tunics and breeches. The native Drennans wore sandals; Kirk and Spock were allowed to retain their boots. Which of the men was their new Ensign they had no idea.

Fordda faced the group. "You have forty eight hours to cross the Wastelands," he said in what was clearly a ritual preparatory announcement. "You may go singly or in pairs. Any who take longer than the allotted time fail this test, but may try again. The Mountain of Maturity is your guide, to direct you on your way. Have you any questions?" He was looking directly at Kirk and Spock as he spoke. It was not surprising; the others probably had a fair notion of what they were facing. Kirk remained silent. He had a faint suspicion that ignorance might be preferable to foreknowledge of what they had to face.

Each aspirant - or pair of aspirants - left at ten minute intervals, disappearing quickly among the tall grass and twiggy shrubs of the Wastelands. Most of them went in pairs, Kirk was relieved to note. If he and Spock had been the only two who chose to go in company it might have given a bad impression. As it was, only three - two men and one girl - chose to go alone.

Kirk and Spock were the last to leave. As he gave them the signal, Fordda said quietly, "Good luck." As he had said it to none of the others, the phrase echoed in their ears with a slightly ominous ring.

At first everything seemed peaceful. They made their way easily through the lush wilderness, Spock's acute sense of direction guiding him unerringly even where they could not see the mountain that was their goal, and Kirk content to rely on his friend's judgement. They maintained a steady pace, unsure of the exact distance but knowing that it was probably fully fifty miles. The mountain had looked a long way off.

When at last they paused to rest, they had covered several miles without incident.

"It seems a strangely easy 'test'," Kirk said as he relaxed. "Even though we're going to have to feed ourselves 'off the land', so to speak, there must be more to it than this."

"Indeed, Captain. Fordda certainly gave us the impression that

we would require events to favour us," Spock agreed.

"So we'd better not let ourselves be lulled into a false sense of security." Even as he spoke, Kirk realised that his friend had not fully relaxed, as he had. *Trust Spock*, he thought, suddenly glad that the Vulcan was with him.

They allowed themselves ten minutes, then went on, still without incident. Slowly the light began to fade. In the half light they stopped where a huge rock provided a little shelter. They had not found either the water they hoped for or a fruit-bearing tree. But forty eight hours of hunger and thirst also seemed a surprisingly easy test, even on top of a lengthy walk, and both were convinced that there must be other hardships still to face.

"I'll take the first watch," Kirk said. Spock nodded and curled up, immediately asleep.

The Human sat fighting drowsiness, helped by the growing hunger about which he could do nothing. The moonless night was silent except for the soft hushing rustle of the leaves and branches of the surrounding bushes. Somewhere, a long way off, a night bird called once; and then the peace of the night returned. Kirk drew a long, deep breath, absorbing the quiet and restfulness that surrounded him.

Abruptly, the silence was shattered by a nearby scream of pure terror, cut off short. Spock sat upright, instantly awake, while Kirk stared into the darkness, trying to identify where the scream had come from. It was too dark to investigate, however. Both knew that if they went blundering in search of... whatever it was... they could easily stumble into extreme danger.

Both remained alert for some minutes, but the silence had resumed as completely as if it had never been broken. Spock lay down again, to fall asleep as easily as if there had been no alarm.

Whether it was the scream that started his imagination working, Kirk never knew. He began to feel a degree of apprehension, straining his eyes in the darkness as he waited for the approach of a danger that he was suddenly sure was there. The apprehension deepened into fear. Something out there was watching him...

Spock stirred and sat up again. The lurking danger seemed to recede a little.

"Is something wrong, Captain?"

"I'm... not sure. I keep feeling that we're being watched."

Spock looked around, his keen eyes with their perfect night vision seeing more than Kirk's in the faint starlight. Bushes... grass... rocks...

"I can't see anything," he said slowly.

"Neither can I. But I can feel it," Kirk replied.

Spock concentrated. "I can sense nothing," he said, "but I shall be doubly watchful. You get some sleep now, Jim. We must still have a long way to go."

Kirk lay down, sure that he wouldn't sleep; and opened his eyes to daylight. He became aware of the fear immediately - and as he looked at Spock, he realised that the Vulcan now also sensed it, although perhaps not quite so acutely.

He stretched and scrambled to his feet. "We might as well move on now," he said. The sooner they moved, the sooner they would reach what he had unconsciously come to regard as safety.

Half a mile away, they found the person who had screamed. One of the men who had started alone lay there. He had found a tree with fruit, for he was still clutching an apple-like fruit in one hand, but he had not had time to begin eating it. He sprawled there, dead, his body unmarked but his face twisted into a grimace of utter terror. The bush he had raided - the only one with fruit that they had seen - was only yards from him. Ludicrous though it seemed, it was as if the tree had in some way managed to punish the man for picking the fruit by killing him.

Kirk and Spock looked at each other.

There was nothing they could do for the victim. The ground was rock hard, the stones they might have used to cover him firmly set in it. They could not even bury him.

As they went on, almost instinctively they moved closer together, knowing that the fear was not imaginary. It was real, whatever caused it, and it could kill, even though whatever caused it did not seem to want the bodies for prey.

A small grey animal - the first they had seen - ran through the trees in front of them, heading towards another of the fruit-bearing trees. Suddenly it stopped short, reared up on its hind legs, and fell. Between it and the tree there was a flicker of... movement? Almost a distortion of the bushes as if waves of hot air were rising in front of them. Yet it was not hot enough for the air to be heated to that extent.

The animal was dead too. They left it and went on, still experiencing fear that - for Kirk - was rapidly deepening into terror.

They were surrounded by heat haze distortions now. Spock paused once to look at one of them, his interest in the phenomenon momentarily overcoming his fear. Kirk caught at his arm.

"Come on, Spock!"

The sensation of being watched deepened. Distrust washed over them, intensifying the causeless dread. Kirk felt, now, as if he was wading through a sea of it, a sticky, syrupy sea that hampered him in his urgent need to escape from the nameless, unseen danger. Spock, less acutely affected, watched his Captain anxiously, wondering how long Kirk could possibly control his terror, knowing that even he dared not relax his control for a moment. Even now, he could hear voices... voices out of the past.

Earthier... uncontrolled, emotional Earthier! You'll never be a true Vulcan... The taunts increased in cruelty. Words he had long forgotten echoed in his ears, battering at his self control, recalling the agony of pain and loneliness that had tortured his childhood and early adulthood, breaking down his resistance... The interruption to his train of thought as they came on another body

was very welcome, although normally the discovery would have horrified him.

They looked down at the dead girl. Bruises on her neck showed where she had been strangled, presumably by her companion who lay, face contorted in horror and fear, a few yards further on.

"What killed her?" Kirk asked, his voice shaking, as they looked at the second dead girl. But he already knew. Fear had driven her to kill her companion - and then she herself had been killed by the terror, even as the man had been. *What horror had she seen - or sensed*, he wondered with revulsion.

The bushes nearby shimmered violently. A fresh wave of panic hit him - so overwhelming that he forgot Spock, forgot the test, forgot everything and began running. He had to escape. From what, he didn't even know.

Spock overtook him and caught him. Kirk struggled to release himself but the Vulcan's superior strength told, and he held Kirk firm. A sure instinct told him that this was how the strangled girl had died, trying to stop her panic-stricken friend.

"Jim!"

"Let me go!"

Spock glanced quickly round. A shadow among the rocks caught his eye; he dragged Kirk over to it. He was right. It was a narrow cave. Perhaps in here Kirk might feel less threatened and regain some measure of control. Spock pulled his friend into the cave.

Predictably, the fear lessened abruptly.

"Relax, Jim," he murmured soothingly. "Relax... "

Slowly the tension left the Human. He looked at Spock.

"What... caused that?"

"I do not know. But unless we can control it, make ourselves believe that it will not harm us, the fear will surely kill us. I noticed that there is a shimmer in the air when the fear is strongest - if that is meaningful, perhaps in here we will gain a brief respite. There is a draught blowing through this cave and it appears to run in the correct direction. I suggest that we follow it."

They set off through the darkness, hands clasped, feeling their way along the walls. The blackness pressed on them claustrophobically.

Abruptly a fresh wave of primitive terror hit Kirk. He whimpered, jerked his hand free of Spock's and began a stumbling run back the way they had come. Desperately, Spock followed.

There was light ahead and a mass of fallen rock on the ground. The cave must fork - this was not the way they had entered! The roof had fallen in here, leaving a deep, narrow canyon. Spock began to overhaul Kirk, now that he could see his way, noticing with a sudden fear that was wholly of his own mind that there was a great gaping hole ahead, directly in Kirk's path. Urgently, Spock lunged forward.

"Jim!"

He caught Kirk desperately, just at the edge of the hole, and they fell heavily, to lie only inches from the drop, Spock holding the still struggling Kirk firmly. Slowly the Human's struggles lessened as Spock's rigidly maintained calmness penetrated the sea of terror that threatened to destroy him. Unmoving, the Vulcan stared, unseeing, across the gap to the open countryside beyond.

Spock lay holding Kirk reassuringly for fully five minutes before he allowed himself to move, his hands gripping his Captain firmly. Out of this place, it seemed, lay certain death. Yet in here... could they even be sure of safety here?

Kirk stirred suddenly, an almost spasmodic reaction that triggered alarm in the Vulcan's normally stoic face.

"Captain - please... " he entreated desperately.

"I know, Spock." Kirk's voice was toneless, weary, and he was still clearly far from regaining his self control.

"Jim, you must believe... It was panic that killed those people. If we do not panic... "

Kirk almost managed a rueful smile, then buried his face against Spock's shoulder.

The gesture strengthened Spock's failing control. With a sudden conviction that this was the way to fight the fear, Spock raised one hand to hold Kirk's head gently, firmly, against his shoulder. After a few minutes, Kirk found himself completely relaxed, the panic merely an unpleasant memory - and Spock knew, with a certainty that surpassed knowledge, that as long as this man lived, he would never need to fear loneliness again.

Memory of the test returned to them, and with it the realisation that to succeed - to survive at all - they had to go out there again... and face the killing fear that someone - or something - would undoubtedly continue to fling at them.

"We must believe it cannot, of itself, harm us," Spock repeated quietly. "Also... it seems to be powerless when faced with l... friendship. If we can hold thoughts of friendship foremost in our minds, we may yet succeed."

"I'll try, Spock." Inwardly, Kirk knew he could feel no friendship for the invisible entities that killed... but his affection for the Vulcan might suffice. He must hold *that* firmly in his mind.

They scrambled to their feet and headed back through the cave, holding on to each other. They hadn't gone far when both became aware of a nagging apprehension.

"It cannot harm us," Spock said reassuringly.

Kirk nodded, even although he knew the Vulcan couldn't see him. Inwardly, he thought, *Spock... my friend. What would I do without you?* The incipient panic faded.

There was daylight ahead again. They walked out of the cave into an evening sunlight. Long shadows lay on the ground. Had so

long passed? Kirk was suddenly acutely aware that it was during the previous night that their troubles had begun.

Spock seemed to read his mind. "You should rest, Captain. Sleep. I am well able to watch all night. But even if I were not, we have seen nothing that could harm us."

"I can take my turn on watch - "

"Jim, you are more likely than I to be affected by the conditions. Asleep, you will not be aware of them. Please, rest properly. We have only a few hours of walking time to complete the test, and we do not know how far we still have to go. If you are unrested, tense from fighting the fear all night, we don't have a chance. Please, Jim," he repeated, seeing that Kirk was unconvinced. "For my sake, if not your own."

"All right," Kirk agreed wearily.

They settled down among rocks just outside the cave. There was not sufficient room for Kirk to lie down, so he slept sitting up. Slowly he slid sideways until his head rested on Spock's shoulder. The Vulcan found himself absorbing comfort from the touch. Slowly the night passed.

Spock shook the Captain awake at first light. There was no point in delaying. They set off at once. The fear was still present, Kirk found, but it was faint and fading fast. Soon it was gone.

Almost three hours later they walked out from among the bushes into cultivated land. Many Drennans were waiting, including some of those who had also just crossed the Wastelands.

They looked at each other, knowing that they had succeeded. But that was of less importance than the knowledge that in some subtle fashion their friendship had deepened even more during those hours of terror. A wordless message of affection passed between them as their eyes met.

Then they turned as Fordda came forward to acknowledge that they were indeed men.

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